

THE PARADOXICAL POPE:
THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND ACTIVE
LIVES OF GREGORY THE GREAT

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To Brett,
who has always stood beside me
behind the Shining Barrier

The Paradoxical Pope: The Contemplative and Active Lives of Gregory the Great

Abstract

Pope Gregory I, now called Gregory the Great, presided over the Roman Church during a tumultuous time. This study will examine the life experiences of Gregory which prepared him to successfully navigate the Church through the twilight years of the Empire, in which the city of Rome faced plague, famine and invasion. Somewhat surprisingly, the experience which prepared Gregory for these troubled seas was his time as a monk in the monastery of St. Andrews. There Gregory experienced the contemplative life, which he would later reconcile with the active life upon his ascension to the Apostolic See. Through this, Gregory formed a model for ecclesiastical leadership which must be understood in order to rightly interpret his actions as pope. One of the most significant events of his papacy, which illustrates these themes, was his sending of missionary monks to evangelize the English, which ultimately aided in securing the position of Rome as the central authority of the Church into the Middle Ages.

Vita

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Chapter One: Introduction

Both the person and the papacy of Pope Gregory I, known as Gregory the Great, represent something of a paradox. The wealthy and talented Roman who became a monk also turned out to be the monk who became pope. The man who fought to protect Rome from the Lombards also spent precious resources sending missionaries to the ends of the Empire. And in what is perhaps his greatest paradox, the man whose biography of St. Benedict would shape the medieval view of the contemplative life rejected the dichotomy between the active and contemplative in his own life and in the Church. Instead, Gregory proposed a reconciliation between the active and contemplative after his experience of being removed from the monastery in order to serve the Church in the world. Through this, Gregory formed a model for developing ecclesiastical leaders by proposing that those who would serve the Church must first be spiritually formed through contemplation and those who sought to live in retreat from the world must go out, in active service of the Church. This reconciliation of seemingly opposite ideas characterized much of Gregory's thought, and also shaped his pontificate. It is important to understand Gregory's thinking in order to put the actions of his pontificate into context and to avoid a misinterpretation of his motives.

Pope Gregory, one of only two popes to bear the name "Great" in the history of the office, lived an extraordinary life in tumultuous times. Born into a senatorial class

family in Rome, Gregory was well educated and served as prefect of Rome.¹ He was born into a family of significant wealth and benefited from the privileges that came with this aristocratic status, including a classical education.² His great-great-grandfather was Pope Felix III (526-530) and several of his female relatives were nuns.³ Though the exact date cannot be determined, sometime after the death of his father, not long after 573, Gregory turned his family home into a monastery, St. Andrew's, and there withdrew into the contemplative life in which he hoped to remain for the rest of his days.⁴ His family property was used for the establishment of another six monasteries, demonstrating Gregory's personal and financial commitment to the monastic life.⁵ In 578, Gregory was called upon by Pope Pelagius II to be ordained as a deacon and sent as a papal envoy to Constantinople.⁶

Upon his return from Constantinople, Gregory reentered the monastery at St. Andrews, around 585/6, and remained there until 590, during what he would recall as the

¹ Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 29-31. Richards summarized the debate over the exact nature of the office Gregory held in Rome before entering the monastery. Most scholars conclude he did in fact serve in the office with the title "prefect," though it had a less significance by Gregory's day.

² John R.C. Martyn, introduction to *The Letters of Gregory the Great, Vol. 1-3*, by Pope Gregory I, trans. John R.C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), 2-3, and Richards, *Consul of God*, 25-26. Martyn overviews the the debate of the extent of Gregory's education. While older scholarship suggested that he had little knowledge of the classics and knew very little Greek, more recent studies have suggested that he referenced numerous classical works in his letters and had a greater knowledge of Greek than he had previously been given credit for.

³ Ibid, 1. It is also suggested that Gregory was related also to Pope Agapitus I (535-536).

⁴ R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁶ Martyn, 4.

happiest time of his life.⁷ However, in 590 the plague once again swept through Rome and killed Pope Pelagius II, after which Gregory was elected pope, much to his dismay.⁸ He would never again return to the monastic life. Instead, he would serve as Bishop of Rome until his death in 603, during which time he led the Roman Church in the face of famine, plague, invasion, conflict, and missionary expansion. He was living in the twilight of the ancient period and, unbeknownst to him, at the dawn of a new age in the Latin West.

This paper will begin with an examination of his conception of the contemplative and active lives as it can be gathered from his writings, including his letters and homilies, and perhaps most importantly his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* (*Book of Pastoral Rule*) in chapters two and three. Next, we will examine his time as pope, including his dealings with the imperial court in Byzantium, the invading barbarians and various threats to Rome, and finally and perhaps most importantly, his sending of missionaries to England in chapters four and five.

Through this examination of Gregory's life first as a monk and then as pope, we will see that "his thought is the proverbial paradox: the whole that is more than the sum of its parts."⁹ His reconciliation of dichotomies illustrates that Gregory understood the counterintuitive nature of the gospel. In citing the example of Christ, he wrote:

Who, indeed, would have been able to govern so perfectly but he who would have reigned over subjects that he himself created? But he

⁷ Markus, 12.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 16.

appeared in the flesh not only to redeem us through the passion but also to teach us through conversation, offering himself as an example to those who follow him. He chose instead the penalty of a shameful death so that his [followers] might also learn to flee the applause of the world, to fear not its terrors, to value adversity for the sake of truth, and to decline prosperity fearfully.¹⁰

Here we see that Gregory grasped the paradoxical nature of the Gospel and the teachings of Scripture. This is something that Gregory preached regularly, and it is the lens through which he saw the world. He understood through the example of Christ that power was not to be grasped, and therefore Gregory's own use of power must be understood in light of this teaching.

It can be tempting to split the spiritual achievements from the political. To look at his influence in Christian mysticism and monastic life would be appropriate, as would an examination of the way his political policy shaped the papacy and the rise of monarchic episcopate. But to divorce these two aspects from one another would leave us with an incomplete picture. Gregory, of all people, should be considered as a whole, as he himself rejected these kinds of dichotomies.

Various scholars have considered these different aspects of Gregory's life and pontificate and their research is richly enhanced by the many volumes of primary source material available to us, including several books, dozens of sermons and hundreds of letters written by Gregory. One of the most influential works of the twentieth century on the history of the papacy was *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A*

¹⁰ Pope Gregory I, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*. George E. Demacopoulos, trans. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007) *Liber* 1.3.

study in the ideological relation of clerical to lay power, published in 1910, by Walter Ullman.¹¹ In his book, Ullman argued that Gregory led the way for the Roman Church in its expansion of political authority in the Middle Ages and fought for its primacy in the West. His research has been so influential that nearly every scholar of Gregory since has in some way responded to Ullman's arguments about Gregory's pontificate, and this paper is no exception. While I will argue that Ullman's claim largely misunderstood Gregory's motivations, his work nevertheless remains an important landmark for the study of papal history.

Jeffrey Richards is author of *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages 476-752*, published in 1979, and *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great*, published in 1980.¹² Richards, more so than Ullman, accounts for Gregory's monasticism in his actions as pope, even saying that Gregory attempted to a degree to "monasticize" the papacy.¹³ R.A. Markus wrote extensively on Christianity in Late Antiquity and the pontificate of Gregory, including *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, published in 1983 and *Gregory the Great and his world*, published in 1997, as well as articles such as "The Latin Fathers" and "Gregory the Great's Europe." Markus was similar to Richards in his balanced treatment of both Gregory's spiritual and political life and addressed Gregory's efforts to reconcile the contemplative and active.

¹¹ Walter Ullman, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A study in the ideological relation of clerical to lay power* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1910).

¹² Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, 476-752* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) and Richards, *Popes and the Papacy*.

¹³ Richards, *Popes and Papacy*, 170.

Carole Straw's scholarship on Gregory the Great differs from these in that she is primarily focused on Gregory's thought rather than his papal activity. Her book *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* does more than perhaps any other to demonstrate the unique thought of Gregory in his paradoxical understanding of the world.¹⁴ She has authored articles on Gregory as well, including "Gregory's Politics: Theory and Practice" in which she demonstrates how Gregory's theology is reflected in his understanding of state power.¹⁵ Also, her article "Gregory's Moral Theology: Divine Providence and Human Responsibility" was published in 2013 in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, a volume dedicated to R.A. Markus that represents some of the most recent scholarship on Gregory, much of which deals with the theme of bringing together his understanding of the contemplative and active lives.¹⁶

This paper will seek to build upon this scholarship by focusing on the influence of Gregory's monasticism on his actions as pope. One could easily choose to examine his pontificate through his experience as prefect of Rome, before he entered the monastery, or his experience as a papal envoy in Constantinople. There is no doubt that his time in these offices aided him in his success when it came to his administrative duties as pope. It would be an important study, but is not the one to be undertaken here. Indeed, there is no doubt that an endless number of experiences shaped Gregory as a man and as pope,

¹⁴ Straw, *Perfection*.

¹⁵ Carole Straw, "Gregory's Politics: Theory and Practice," in *Gregorio Magno e il suo Tempo* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1991) 1:47-63

¹⁶ Carole Straw, "Gregory's Moral Theology: Divine Providence and Human Responsibility" in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Matthew Del Santo. (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 177-204.

but here I will aim to demonstrate that the experience of being in the monastery and then being called out of it led to one of Gregory's more unique approaches to the Christian life, namely his reconciliation of the contemplative and active, and that this impacted not only his theology, but also his priorities as he worked to balance the tension between ecclesiastical and temporal authority as both the successor to St. Peter and the subject of the emperor.

Chapter Two: Gregory's View of the Contemplative Life

There is no doubt that Gregory's time as a monk was a major shaping influence in his life and a foundational experience that would inform his actions from that time onward. The central element to the monastic life was the experience of contemplation, and therefore in order to understand the impact of Gregory's time as a monk on his life as pope, his views on the contemplative life must first be understood. We will see in this chapter that Gregory's view of the contemplative life was one of practicality. The purpose of contemplation was to experience God and humble man. First, we will consider Gregory's view in the context of early Christianity and in the context of his life. Second, we will examine Gregory's view of the contemplative as the highest form of the Christian life. Third, we will look at his understanding of the process of contemplation through purgation and ascension while combating the sin of pride.

In order to do this, we will focus on Gregory's *Homiliae in Hiezechihalem* (*Homilies in Ezekiel*). However, as Dom Butler Cuthbert notes in his book *Western Mysticism: Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, "St. Gregory wrote no set treatise on mystical theology; his teaching is to be found embedded in his principal writings, and is manifestly the record of his personal

experiences.”¹ This is the case with nearly all of Gregory’s theology, and to understand his view on almost any topic, selections of his writings must be pieced together, so we will look at passages from his other works as well. The major exception to this is his view of pastoral leadership, which is stated plainly in *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, and will be examined in the next chapter. Fortunately, many of Gregory’s writings have survived, and it is therefore possible to assemble an idea of his views.

From these writings it is possible to gain a sense of Gregory’s understanding of the contemplative life and, as we shall see, his view was one of practicality, as was the case with much of his theology. There is no doubt that he viewed the contemplative life as the highest option for a Christian, the best life, and the surest way to experience God. This chapter will demonstrate that while Gregory’s view of monasticism was not particularly innovative, as it was in line with the views of many who came before him, it represents a sort of middle ground between the less intellectual view of his predecessor Augustine and a less emotional view of his successor Bernard of Clairvaux, giving it a particularly practical nature. This practicality was found in the purpose of contemplation for Gregory, which was to spiritually form the individual so that he might be a good servant to the Church. This shows the pastoral concern that was central to Gregory’s thought and action through his pontificate.

¹ Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968) 65-66. Butler only addresses in his text *Moralia*, *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, and *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* According to Butler, these texts which are certain to be authentic, provide ample material for examining Gregory’s contemplation and he therefore does not address texts like the commentary on Kings, Canticle, and Penitential Psalms, as their authorship is questioned.

The objective of this chapter is to understand the importance of the contemplative life and the nature of its practice for Gregory, which will enable us to see in the significance of his reconciliation of the active and contemplative in the next chapter. This will provide the foundation necessary for examining the impact of this experience on his papacy, which will be considered in the last two chapters. What did it mean to Gregory to live as a monk, why was he so devastated to leave the monastery and what about it did he take with him when he left?

Gregory's Views in Context

In Context of Other Writers

Before looking at Gregory's writings regarding the contemplative life, it will be helpful to situate Gregory in the context of earlier Christian teaching on the subject as well as later medieval developments. By the time Gregory became pope in the late sixth century, the Empire was thoroughly Christian, and this backdrop created a distinction in Gregory's views from those of the earlier Church fathers.² For example, according to Butler, there is little trace of pagan philosophical influence in Gregory's thought, in contrast to Augustine, and what little might be found there is more likely the result of Augustine's own neo-platonic influences.³ Gregory's views on the contemplative were derived from others that came before him and he created a synthesis of the views of

² Stephen Kessler, "Gregory the Great" in *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis Vol. 2*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1336.

³ Butler, 76. Butler notes the one passage he believes contains a trace of neo-platonic thought, in *Moralia* 33.42, where Gregory speaks of the Many and the One, but Butler believes this is due to the influence of Augustine.

others. His contribution was not in his innovation but rather in his practical application of these ideas. While Gregory's own monastic rule under which he lived is unknown, it is likely that it borrowed from the ideas of St. Benedict, who was influenced by the writings of Cassian.⁴ Gregory was the first to write a life of St. Benedict in a chapter of his *Dialogia (Dialogues)*⁵ and his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* also borrows from the Benedictine tradition.⁶ Scholars note the influence of Origen and Cassian on Gregory as well, though again he borrows without strictly following them when it comes to the contemplative experience.⁷

In view of the developments in monasticism and contemplation later in the medieval period, Barbara Müller notes Gregory's lasting influence through the popularity of the Benedictine Rule. The Benedictine rule became dominant in later centuries, due at least in part to Gregory's biography of Benedict provided in *Dialogia*. However, according to Müller, this has caused many to assume that Gregory's own monastic experience was Benedictine as well. This was not necessarily the case, and Müller argues that it was likely a "mixed rule" at St. Andrews influenced by multiple strands of early Christian monasticism.⁸

Finally, Butler places Gregory into the context of contemplative thought by comparing Gregory to both Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux and situating Gregory's

⁴ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), 12.

⁵ Barbara Müller, "Gregory the Great and Monasticism" in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, ed. Neil Bronwen and Matthew J. Dal Santo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 88.

⁶ Ibid, 90.

⁷ Ibid, 86.

⁸ Ibid.

views between the two. "...In his teaching on contemplation St Gregory stands where we should expect the Roman to stand— less intellectual than St Augustine, less emotional than St Bernard. But if he falls short of the elevation of the former and the unction of the latter, he has value all his own for his Roman actuality and practicality..."⁹ By understanding Gregory's monasticism in this way, we see a theme that will occur repeatedly through this study of Gregory's thought and life— that of being "both/and" rather than "either/or." Rather than intellectual detachment or emotional rapture, Gregory's balanced view kept focused on his practical goal of the contemplative experience. In the next chapter, we will see that this goal was the the spiritual formation of the individual for the purpose of serving the Church.

In Context of Gregory's Life

In addition to placing Gregory's views on monasticism into the context of early Christian writers and later medieval developments, it is also necessary to understand them in the context of Gregory's own life. Gregory's practicality in spiritual practices arose from the circumstances of his own experience. All of the writings that we have of Gregory's were composed after 579, when he was called out of the monastery to serve then Pope Pelagius II in Constantinople.¹⁰ Therefore, these writings are composed by a *former* monk, no longer living the monastic life but clearly shaped by that experience in a profound way. His works on the contemplative life reflect back on that time and he

⁹ Butler, 66.

¹⁰ Straw, *Perfection*, 5.

frequently referred to his reluctance to leave the monastery. After serving as a papal legate and deacon from 579 to 585/6, Gregory briefly returned to the monastery, but once he became pope in 590, that would never again be possible, something which caused him a great deal of anguish.

Far beyond a ceremonial or rhetorical declaration of his unworthiness for the office of pope, Gregory truly lamented the loss of the monastic life. In September of 590, the same month of his consecration, Gregory wrote to Paul the scholastic:

However much strangers congratulate me, due to the honor of my episcopal office, I do not put much value on it. But when you congratulate me over this matter, it brings me no little pain, as you are very well aware of my wish and yet believe that I have been successful. For it would have been the highest promotion for me if what I wanted could have been fulfilled, if I had been able to achieve my desire, which you have long known about, the attainment of longed-for peace and quiet. But as things are... I am held bound by the chains of this office in the city of Rome...¹¹

Written in the earliest days of his pontificate, Gregory here expressed that while his friend considered him to be “successful” in his achievement of this office, Gregory would have considered it the “highest promotion” to have been able to return to the “longed-for peace and quite” of the monastic life. Later chapters will deal more explicitly with Gregory’s definition of success, but here it is clear that reaching the highest ecclesiastical office was not the highest good for Gregory.

¹¹ Pope Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great, Vol. 1-3*, ed. John R.C. Martyn, ed (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004) *Reg.* 1.3

In another letter a month later to his friend, the Count Nares, Gregory again expressed his sadness at the loss not only of peace and quite but of the contemplative experience that they bring:

As you describe the heights of contemplation, you have made me lament my ruin once again. For I heard what I had lost internally, while I was ascending to the highest command, externally and undeservedly. But realize that I am struck by so much grief that I am scarcely able to speak. For the eyes of my mind are blocked off by the shadows of my grief. Whatever I look at is gloomy, whatever I think is delightful appears lamentable to my heart. For I weigh carefully, falling from the high summit of my repose, to what a low peak of external advancement I have risen. And sent, for my sins, into an occupational exile from the face of the Lord, I say with the prophet in his words, as at the destruction of Judea: “He who comforted me has withdrawn far from me.”¹²

Gregory here described what it was that he had lost— the ability to see and the ability to be before the “face of the Lord.” He contrasted “ascending to the highest command” of the papal office with “falling from the high summit of my repose” in the life of contemplation. He even went so far as to consider this new exalted office a punishment for his sins. This shows Gregory’s paradoxical view of the world, that he would call his election as the Bishop of Rome and the successor of St. Peter a “low peak of external advancement.” This gives context to Gregory’s writings on monasticism. From the comments about his own life it is clear that he viewed the contemplative life as being higher than the active life, and he longed for the days when he was free to seek the face of God and experience Him.

¹² *Reg.*, 1.6

Gregory's view of the contemplative life

The Highest Good

That Gregory was grieved to leave the monastery is clear from his own words. Yet we will see here and in the following chapter, Gregory did not despise the world, and in fact he believed it was the duty of a Christian to serve his neighbor, as Scripture says. Still the contemplative life was unmistakably the higher good. Here we will further explore Gregory's ideas about the exalted state of the contemplative life, its practice, and its purpose.

While many of Gregory's writings discuss the contemplative life, and it has already been noted that Gregory's theological writings were in no way systematic, his *Homilies on Ezekiel* give a concise statement of his views. This book contains sermons preached in Rome in 593, three years after Gregory's ascent to the papacy and fourteen years after leaving the monastery of St. Andrews.¹³ According to Butler, "This passage, extending over §§ 8-20 of the *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, II.v, is the one piece in St. Gregory's writing that may claim to be in any way a scientific or psychological exposition of the process of contemplation."¹⁴ In Book I, Gregory addressed one of the most commonly cited biblical illustrations of the contemplative and active lives.¹⁵ Talking about Mary and Martha, Gregory wrote:

¹³ Theodosia Gray, preface to *The Homilies of Saint Gregory the Great on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Gray (Etna: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1990), 10.

¹⁴ Butler, 69.

¹⁵ Ibid, 160. Augustine, Origen, and Cassian, among others, looked at Mary and Martha as representatives of the active and contemplative lives.

The one [Martha] was therefore intent on action, the other on contemplation. The one served the active through the external ministry, the other contemplative through the suspension of her heart on the Word. *And, although the active is good, the contemplative is nevertheless better*, because the former departs with mortality while the latter burgeons in immortal life... For even if we can accomplish something good through action, we nevertheless fly to heavenly joy through contemplation. Hence in Moses the active is called servitude and the contemplative is liberty.¹⁶ (emphasis mine)

This statement is crowded with themes important to Gregory's conception of the Christian life. First, the contemplative life is clearly the higher good. Martha and the active life are described as servitude while Mary and the contemplative life are described as liberty. Yet, even this idea of servitude of the active life should not be understood as a denigrating that life, as Gregory notes it is possible to "accomplish something good through action." In fact, as the next chapter will show, sacrificing the joy of contemplation in order to serve the Church is something that Gregory himself did and called others to do. Therefore servitude is not necessarily negative for Gregory, but it does not compare to the joy to be found in the liberty of the contemplative life. Second, this passage shows the centrality of the Word in the contemplative life, which will be explored later in this chapter. Third, this passage shows that the active life is only for the present, but the contemplative life is eternal. The eternal nature of the contemplative gives it greater value, but Gregory also sees that because it is eternal, it can be delayed in order to serve in the active life in the present.

¹⁶ Pope Gregory I. *The Homilies of Saint Gregory the Great on the Book of Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Gray (Etna: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1990), HEz. 3.9.

Having established the superiority of the contemplative life in Book I, Gregory continued to explain the differences between the active and contemplative in Book II:

So the active life is to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant with the word of wisdom, to set aright the lost, to recall a proud neighbor to the life of humility, to care for the weak, which services each of us should perform, and provide the wherewithal of subsistence for those entrusted to us. Truly the contemplative life is to hold fast with the whole mind, at least to the charity of God, our neighbor but to abstain from external action; to cleave to the sole desire for the Creator, so that the only recourse for the spirit is, scorning all cares, to burn to see the face of its Creator, so that it now understands how to bear the weight of corruptible flesh with grief; to seek with all its desires to be among those hymn-singing choirs of Angels, to mingle with the citizens of Heaven, to rejoice at the eternal incorruption in the presence of God.¹⁷

Again, the deeds of the active life are good and they are “services each of us should perform.” Yet, in order to see the face of God, one must “abstain from external action” and “cleave to the *sole* desire for the Creator...scorning all cares.” This puts the contemplative squarely at odds with the active. The next chapter will explore Gregory’s efforts to hold these two together and to put each, the contemplative and the active, to a practical and pastoral use. What is clear here is that Gregory believed the contemplative life to be the highest good, the purest and best way to experience God, and to be at odds with the action in the world.

Scripture

Returning to Gregory’s discussion of Mary and Martha as representatives of the contemplative and active lives in Homily III.9, we touch on a key theme for Gregory—

¹⁷ HEz. 2.8.

the connection between the contemplative task and the Word of God. Gregory noted that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and experienced not only his presence but “the suspension of her heart on the Word.” While Gregory’s elevation of the contemplative life over the active life was quite standard for his time, his emphasis on the connection to God’s Word stands out. G.R. Evans notes this distinctive element of Gregory’s view: “... Gregory’s own experience gave him a fresh view of these relatively common experiences. Contemplating God is, for Gregory, an experience of authoritative revelation at first hand, to set beside the revelation the Christian can read in the Bible or see around him in the created world.”¹⁸ The revelation in Scripture comes first, and it is believed because it comes from a trusted source, but the experience enhances and reinforces the truth that is revealed in Scripture.¹⁹

For Gregory, as for many of his predecessors, the goal of contemplation was to experience God and to achieve union with him.²⁰ Yet for Gregory, it was essential that this experience be rooted in God’s Word. Stephen Kessler, in his chapter “Gregory the Great” in the *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, describes Gregory’s view this way: “In scripture, God has given lost human beings the possibility to convert and recuperate the awareness of their earliest blessedness. With a reference to Ps. 119.105, the Bible is seen as a light in the darkness of that pilgrimage, a mirror of the soul (*speculum animae*) allowing again interior intelligence and self-awareness, a food and drink keeping people

¹⁸ G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 105.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

alive.”²¹ Because Gregory saw Scripture as so essential to the contemplative life, it follows that this would influence Gregory’s approach to interpreting Scripture. According to Kessler, Gregory was the “first pope exegete in history,”²² and as already noted, he was no systematic theologian.²³ Rather than being concerned with major theological issues or a systematic treatment of the text, the primary goal of Gregory’s exegesis, and also the primary goal of his pastoral writings, missionary activities, and even his political philosophy, were all rooted in his aim to see his people live the Christian life, which was made possible by the revelation contained in Scripture. In his *Homiliae in Hiezechielem* Gregory declared: “O, how wondrous is the depth of God’s words. It is permitted to turn our minds to it, to penetrate its secrets, with grace as our guide.”²⁴ Kessler therefore concludes that the “central preoccupation in all his exegetical writings” was “Conversion, culminating in the ascetic life of contemplation,” and that this was the basis for Gregory’s understanding the Scriptures.²⁵ Gregory’s exegesis shows that he understood Scripture to be the means by which one may know God, and therefore engage with him in contemplation and experience him.

Scripture aided in contemplation not merely by conveying information about God, but it also aided in the very act of contemplation by causing man to fix his gaze upward. In the Preface to Book II of *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, Gregory remarked on how difficult scriptural interpretation was in the midst of the cares of the world. Here

²¹ Kessler, 1349.

²² Ibid, 1339.

²³ Ibid, 1336.

²⁴ *HEz.* 5.1.

²⁵ Kessler, 1336.

attempting to write on the text of Ezekiel 40, Gregory noted the challenges presented by not only the complexity of the text but also the distractions of the world around him. He wrote, “Agilulphus, King of the Lombards, has crossed the Po and is proceeding with utmost haste to besiege us. So think, dearest brothers, what does a downcast mind, occupied with the emotions of fear, avail to penetrate obscure and mystical ideas?”²⁶

While trying to write about the Scriptures, Gregory was distracted by nothing less than an invading army. This gives a vivid picture of the challenge that Gregory faced in trying to maintain his inner focus while living outside of the monastery. This is precisely the reason that he found himself looking for a way to bring the contemplative and active together, as the next chapter will show.

In addition to being pulled downward by the cares of the active life, Gregory believed that man was dulled and distracted by the world after the Fall, and as a result man could not understand Scripture or see what it meant to say.²⁷ Therefore, Scripture not only aided in contemplation, but contemplation aided in understanding Scripture, as it allowed one to withdraw from distractions in order to seek God and gain insight into the Word since a “divine dispensation,” as Kessler puts it, was needed from God in order to understand Scripture.²⁸ This made the monastic retreat an essential element to the contemplative life.

²⁶ *HEz.* 2.0.

²⁷ Kessler, 1349.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

The Process of Contemplation

Purgation and Ascension

Seeing how the distractions of the world inhibited knowing God through contemplation, it is not difficult to see the necessity of removal from the world. Once removed, however, what did contemplation entail? Turning now to Gregory's description of the act of contemplation, we see that the process involved rigorous effort in both purgation and ascension. Given what has already been seen regarding comparison of the active life to service and the contemplative life to liberty, as well as the understanding that contemplation was experiencing God, it might seem at first glance that the contemplative life was one of leisure. If that were the case, it would be easy to understand why Gregory was so devastated to be called out of the monastery and why he looked back at that time in his life with such longing. However, Gregory's own words in his Homilies indicate otherwise:

Then there is in the contemplative life much mental struggle, when it rises toward the heavenly, when it stretches the spirit in spiritual things, when it strives to transcend everything which is bodily seen, when it narrows in order to extend. And sometimes indeed it conquers and overcomes the resistant shadows of its blindness so that lightly and stealthily it touches the hem of the uncircumscribed light, but repelled forthwith it turns back to itself and from that light to which it passes with inspiration it returns with a sigh to the darkness of its blindness.²⁹

Here Gregory described the struggle involved in focusing the mind on spiritual things, that it "narrows in order to extend." This extension was in an upward direction, and this narrowing required purgation, which could only take place through separation from the

²⁹ HEz. 2.2.

world,³⁰ which necessitated the monastic lifestyle. Even once attained, it was a brief experience, quickly returning “with a sigh to the darkness of blindness.” Withdrawal from the world was needed in order to dedicate oneself to the kind of lifestyle that would allow for contemplation, or the process of ascension and attainment of the mystical experience of God.³¹ Butler describes Gregory’s conception of contemplation in this way:

It is a struggle wherein the mind disengages itself from the things of this world and fixes its attention wholly on spiritual things, and thereby raises itself above itself, and by dint of a great effort mounts up to a momentary perception of the ‘unencompassed Light’, as through a chink; and then, exhausted by the effort and blinded by the vision of the Light, it sinks back wearied to its normal state, to recuperate its spiritual strength by exercising the works of the active life, till in due time it can again brace itself for the effort of another act of contemplation.³²

Therefore we see that the act of contemplation was one of tremendous work, requiring concentrated effort and leaving one exhausted, but with a great reward. This labor was made possible by separation from the world, which allowed for the withdrawal necessary for purgation, which Butler notes was for Gregory, as well as other mystics, the “first stage in the spiritual life.”³³ Turning again to the key sections of *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, Gregory continued to describe this work:

For we often wish to ponder the invisible nature of Almighty God but by no means avail, and the soul, wearied by the very difficulties, withdraws into herself and makes for herself and from herself the steps of her ascent, so that she first considers herself, if she can, and then examines insofar as she can the nature which is above her. But our mind, if spread out in

³⁰ Butler, 68.

³¹ Pope Gregory I, *Moralia in Job*, Vol. 1-3 (Ex Fontibus Company, 2012) Mor. 6.56-61.

³² Buttler, 67. Butler is here referencing his work in *Benedictine Monachism*.

³³ Butler, 68. He describes the experience in this way: “The claim consistently and unequivocally made by the whole line of great mystics found, perhaps, its simplest and most arresting expression in these words of St. Augustine: ‘My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being— That Which Is.’” Butler, 4.

carnal images, by no means suffices to consider itself or the nature of the soul because it is led by as many thoughts as it is, so to speak, blinded by obstacles.³⁴

Gregory described the challenges and obstacles that must be overcome, including the need for self-examination and purgation, and the removal of distractions. He then moved into a more specific description of the process itself in the following section:

The first step is to compose oneself, the second to see the like of this composure, the third to rise above oneself and by intention submit to the contemplation of the invisible Creator. But one by no means composes himself unless he has first leaned to curb the apparitions of earthy and heavenly images from his mind's eye and cast out and tread down whatever of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste occurs to his bodily thought, in order that he may inwardly seek such as is free thereof.³⁵

While it required a great deal of effort to “rise above oneself” and to “curb the apparitions” of the things that distract the mind, Gregory also recognized that this was not done by man's effort alone. Without God revealing himself and also aiding the contemplative mind, the task would not be possible. These passages from *Homiliae in Hiezechielem* contain some of the clearest descriptions of the effort to experience and unite with God through removal from the world, purgation, and ascension. Even once that had been achieved, it was necessary to continually discipline the mind. Gregory described this in *Moralia*:

Whoever has already subdued the insolences of the flesh, has this task left him, to discipline his mind by the exercises of the holy working; and whosoever opens his mind in holy works, has over and above to extend it to the secret pursuits of inward contemplation.³⁶

³⁴ HEz. 1.5.8.

³⁵ HEz. 1.5.9.

³⁶ Mor. 6.56.

The demanding process of ascension required purgation and isolation, as well as discipline and focus of the mind. The reward was to not only experience God but also to receive illumination in understanding Scripture.

Gregory, like other contemplatives, emphasized the transient and momentary nature of the experience of God's presence. Recognizing this gives context to his lament over leaving the monastery, as he would never again be able to remove himself from the world in order to attain this experience. This would later play an important role as he came to terms with his removal from the monastic life and his efforts to reconcile the contemplative and active, which would be illustrated by his efforts to maintain his monasticism while occupying the office of pope.

Pride

Aside from the distractions of the world, perhaps the single most significant barrier to contemplation, and in fact a significant barrier to one's ability to live the Christian life, was the sin of pride. Combating the sin of pride was the essence of Gregory's spirituality and ethics.³⁷ The great danger of pride was that it prevented spiritual ascent which, as shown above, was key to the process of contemplation. Here *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, which has already been noted as influential for Gregory's monasticism, provides a helpful source on understanding the monastic approach to dealing with pride. Chapter VII of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, titled "Of Humility"

³⁷ Matthew Baasten, *Pride According to Gregory the Great: A Study of the Moralia*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 13.

outlines twelve steps through which man lowers himself in humility in order that he might ascend to God.³⁸ In this we see the paradoxical nature of spiritual progress, in which one will “... descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.”³⁹ This is precisely the counterintuitive nature of the struggle that Gregory saw as central to the contemplative process.

Gregory returned repeatedly throughout his writings to the matter of pride, speaking of its dangers and to the need for humility for all Christians, whatever their position in life. In order to make the right ethical choices in the active life, pride had to first be addressed in the spirituality of the contemplative life. In fact, Gregory addressed the ways in which pride affected the two different lives by defining two different kinds of pride—the spiritual and the carnal.⁴⁰ Yet the two were actually different outward manifestations of the same sin, which was to see oneself as equal to God and better than other men. Carnal pride came from worldly success and spiritual pride came from believing that one progressed toward God and overcame sin by personal effort.⁴¹ The act of contemplation combated pride on both fronts, because it could not be achieved by man’s own efforts and because it created dependance on God by requiring His action. Furthermore, contemplation turned man’s gaze upward toward God and illuminated his own lowliness and sinfulness.

³⁸ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Timothy Fry, ed. Reprint Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1998) 16-20.

³⁹ Benedict, *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 19-20.

⁴¹ Ibid.

While contemplation aided in combating pride, both the contemplative and active man were at risk for this sin. Gregory explained that it was not the deed, but the intention of the heart, that determined whether or not something was done in pride. In Homily IV. 4, Gregory discussed the potential corruption of each mode of living:

For whether he be watchful in good works, or in true contemplation, then truly that which he does is good when he desires to please Him from Whom he came. For he who seems to do good, and thereby desires to please not God but men presses the face of his intention downwards. And he, therefore who contemplates the essence of divinity in sacred speech, in order that through his understanding he may be engrossed in disputes, because he does not seek to be satisfied by the sweetness of desired blessedness, but to seem learned, that man surely does not stretch his wings beyond his own intelligence.....It must therefore be remembered that every good deed which is done by the intention is always lifted up to the heavens.⁴²

Here Gregory suggested that both “good works” and “true contemplation” could be pleasing to God if that was the motivation of the heart. There was a connection between the intention of the heart and the direction it would lead man, as “he... presses the face of his intention downwards” or “every good deed which is done by the intention is always lifted up to the heavens.” This is the same directional language used in describing the process of purgation and ascension in the previous section. Here we see that ascent and descent are tied to the motivation of the heart, whether it is set on pleasing man or God, more than whether or not the deed is active or contemplative. This would become essential to Gregory’s efforts to reconcile the contemplative and active lives once he left the monastery. In this, Gregory would find a way to live an active life that was pleasing

⁴² *HEz.* 1.4.4.

to God by combating pride in himself while he occupied the most exalted office in the Church. This also meant calling others to serve the Church in humility in the active life, and, as the next chapter will show, the qualifications for Church leaders described in *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* almost always include a mention of humility, which is aided by contemplation.

Conclusion:

Given Gregory's understanding of the contemplative life, it is easy to see why the loss of that life caused him such distress. For Gregory, contemplation was the highest good of the Christian life and the means by which man could more clearly and truly see himself and experience God. It offered an opportunity to restore that which was lost through the Fall, to regain fellowship and intimacy with God. It offered a life of freedom and great reward. While the next chapter will closely examine Gregory's reconciliation of the contemplative and active, it is clear that he held the contemplative in higher regard than the active, and that Gregory understood both could be pleasing to God and both could be displeasing. The intention of the heart was key.

However, contemplation could only be achieved through withdrawal from the world, which would enable the necessary purgation and freedom from distractions that were required to turn the mind upwards and to begin the ascent that would lead to God. While man could not achieve this alone without the Spirit of God, these conditions that were provided by the monastic retreat were essential. As we have seen, when Gregory speaks of the distraction of the world, he speaks from experience. It is this experience,

both as a monk for a time and a pope later in life that puts Gregory in the unique position to speak so genuinely and clearly to both the contemplative and active lives, their advantages and challenges.

Furthermore, for a man who took so seriously the dangers of pride, it is not difficult to see how he considered his election as pope to be a punishment rather than a reward. This new office would not only permanently prohibit him from the isolation that was needed to achieve the union with God that he so longed for, but instead it would tempt him with pride and also consume him with the needs of his people. As Gregory sought to come to terms with this, he attempted to reconcile the contemplative and active lives in order to find a middle ground, so that he might fulfill his calling.

In the next chapter we will examine the ways in which Gregory brings these two together and, in doing so, we will see that Gregory demanded of both himself and other leaders that they simultaneously embody the seemingly opposite ideals of the contemplative and active lives. He called them to be humble and bold, to be intellectual and emotional, to serve God and their neighbors. This came from the man who was both monk and pope, and whose paradoxical understanding of the universe considered it a loss to be elevated to the highest office of the Church. It is important to understand this about Gregory in order to rightly interpret his actions as pope in dealing with the Empire and sending missionaries to the West, as we will see in chapters three and four.

Chapter Three:
Gregory's Reconciliation of the Contemplative and Active Lives

Given Gregory's understanding of the importance of the monastic life, the rigors involved, and the reward for such labor, it is not surprising that he was so devastated by being removed from that life. Yet to be pope was a position of great honor and power already in the sixth century.¹ How then did Gregory resolve this tension between the active life into which he was thrust and the contemplative life that he so longed for? In this chapter, we will see how he drew upon the ideas of several fourth century patriarchs to reconcile the contemplative and active lives, and in doing so, created a model for Christian leadership. According to this model, Gregory taught that men who desired to live holy lives in the monastery should come out into the world to serve the Church, and that men who desired to have positions of leadership in the Church should first retreat to the monastery in order to be made holy through the contemplative experience. In this way, Gregory not only brought together the contemplative and active in his own life, but also sought to bring them together in the lives of other individuals and in the Church.

In this chapter, we will examine the ways in which Gregory's writings reflect his own experience with this union between the contemplative and active, and how he used this to formulate his model for Christian leadership. First, we will examine this idea of reconciliation between the two modes of living in the early Church and in Gregory's own

¹ Richards, *Popes and the Papacy*, 2-4, 9-10. Richards maintains that while not yet the papal monarchy that it would become in the Middle Ages, the primacy of the papal office had been long established by Gregory's reign and been officially recognized by the Emperor Justinian I. He further argues that the prestige of the Roman see was inherited from the city's past as the capital of the empire. This, combined with the temporal authority exercised by sixth and seventh century popes out of necessity in the wake of failing civic infrastructure resulted in "a papacy whose power was enhanced beyond its wildest dreams." (pg. 4)

life. Next, we will examine evidence for these ideas in Gregory's writings such as his *Homilae in Hiezechielem*, *Moralia*, and *Dialogia*. Then we will look in detail at the way these ideas form a model for Christian leadership in his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* and how this book of pastoral leadership instructed men to address the issue of pride, one of the greatest challenges for leaders according to Gregory. Lastly, we will see how he used this model to call men to be servant leaders in the Church by maintaining their inward spiritual focus and humbly serving in the active life after having been trained in the contemplative. Through this, we will see that Gregory's own crisis of leaving the monastery forced him to seek a resolution for the tension between the active and contemplative, and that by doing so, he created a practical model for ministry that he would apply to his own time as pope.

Reconciliation of Contemplative and Active

Early Christian background

This need for reconciliation resulted from the bifurcation that had been created in the 4th century between the lay and monastic communities following the legalization of Christianity in the Empire. This produced a "pastoral crisis," as devout Christians withdrew into monastic communities to dedicate themselves to the rigors of asceticism and to distinguish themselves from the flood of new and shallow Christians who converted in the wake of the Christianity's legalization.² By the end of the sixth century, there was a significant gap between the monastic life, which offered a retreat from the

²George E. Demacopoulos, introduction to *The Book of Pastoral Rule*. George E. Demacopoulos, trans. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 11.

world and the opportunity to pursue experiencing God above all else, and the “career path” of the clergy, which increasingly provided positions of political influence in the Church and Empire.

Gregory could readily relate to the tension created by this division, as he longed to live his life in monastic retreat. However, now pope, Gregory drew upon the ideas of earlier writers to create a path for the two lives to coexist. George Demacopoulos, author of “Gregory’s Model of Spiritual Direction in the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*” and translator of the most recent English edition of the *Regula*, cites treatises written by Ambrose of Milan, Gregory Nazianzen, John Cassian and John Chrysostom as all having made similar efforts to lay out monastic practice as training for the ideal Christian leader.³ It is possible that Gregory may have been exposed to these ideas while serving as the papal representative in Constantinople before becoming pope.⁴

Much scholarship has been done on examining the influence of ancient philosophers and earlier Christian writers on the thought of Gregory, and many scholars disagree on the extent of his education in the classics, his knowledge of Greek, and his use of philosophy.⁵ While many profitable studies have been done on the subject, a detailed examination of these influences is beyond the scope of this work, as the primary task here is to examine the influence of his monastic experiences. What is relevant to note

³ George E. Demacopoulos, “Gregory’s Model of Spiritual Direction in the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*” in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, ed. Bronwen Neil and Matthew Del Santo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 205-208.

⁴ Müller, 89.

⁵ Straw, *Perfection*, 16.

here is how these ideas may have influenced Gregory in his union of the contemplative and active. Straw explains:

Ideas of balance, equilibrium, and moderation would have been keynotes in Gregory's classical education and in his Christian sources. Yet because Gregory is so concerned with God's paradoxical ordering of the universe, and because he sees justice, righteousness, and virtue as reciprocity and equilibrium—that is, a mean between extremes—his writings are often reminiscent of Aristotle, Cicero, Plotinus, and any number of ancient writers who shared so many ideas about the harmony of the cosmos.⁶

Straw suggests that Gregory was drawing upon the “residue of Greek philosophy latent in Christianity” rather than being a serious student of the classics, and that he was more directly influenced by Augustine and Cassian, as Demacopoulos also suggests.⁷

Whatever the extent of the influence of classical thought or that of early Christian writers, Markus concludes, “Two overriding needs in his [Gregory's] mind dominated the way in which he appropriated ideas from earlier writers: the need to represent all rule and authority in terms of service— itself an old Christian idea— and the need to find a way of integrating the active and the contemplative lives in the life and work of the ruler.”⁸ Once again, Gregory's contribution lay not in innovation but in practical application of these ideas in the life of the ecclesiastical leader, which was perhaps nowhere more evident than in his writing of *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, as we will see later in this chapter.

⁶ Straw, *Perfection*, 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R.A. Markus, “The Latin Fathers” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350- c. 1450* ed. J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988) 117.

Gregory's life experience

Gregory's wrestling with the conflict between the longing to be left to the competitive life and the demand to go and serve in the active life was not limited to a single episode upon his appointment as a papal legate in 578. Instead, it became a recurring theme in his life and in his writings. The last chapter discussed Gregory's experience as a monk at St. Andrews and his lament over leaving. His descriptions of the contemplative experience come from his own first-hand knowledge of that life. However, how did Gregory live once he became pope? There is evidence to suggest that while he did not remain in the monastery, he sought to bring as much of the monastery with him as possible. In *The Medieval Theologians*, Charles Kannengiesser, in describing Gregory's pontificate, comments that "Rarely, if ever, was Christian mysticism so intensely involved in worldly affairs without losing its genuine inspiration."⁹ Gregory was able to maintain his inner orientation toward God and Scripture even while engaged in worldly affairs. This personal experience with both modes of Christian living shaped Gregory's efforts to resolve this tension, making it practical, not theoretical, as it was a resolution he needed for his own life.¹⁰

Gregory's early letters upon his papal election reflect not only his longing for monastic life, but also his efforts to ease the tension between the contemplative and active in his own thinking and to formulate his ideas on Christian ministry.¹¹ In one letter, Gregory said that he had resigned himself to a "happier state," despite his desire to have

⁹ Charles Kannengiesser, "Boethius, Cassiodorus, Gregory the Great" in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G.R. Evans, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 30.

¹⁰ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 19.

¹¹ Ibid, 14, and *Reg.* 1.26, 1.30.

been left to a quiet life.¹² In these letters, Gregory noted the high honor of being appointed to the Apostolic See, but this honor came with great pastoral responsibilities, which would prevent him from extended periods of studying Scripture and from withdrawing from the distractions of the world, necessary ingredients for contemplation. Yet the increase in responsibilities meant that the preparation of contemplation was all the more important.¹³

In order to maintain this ability to seek God while serving as pope, Gregory “monasticized” the papacy, by exclusively employing monks and clerics in the papal household,¹⁴ and seems to have continued to experience a contemplative state in his own mind even outside of the monastery. He wrote in a letter to the emperor’s sister: “Therefore, let us give thanks to that Spirit which lifts up the hearts that it fills, and which amid the tumult of humans creates a place of retreat in the mind, and in its presence every place is free of care for a soul feeling remorse.”¹⁵ Gregory was able to resign himself to the life to which he had been called by maintaining his focus on experiencing God and determining that he would serve the Church with the knowledge brought by the contemplative experience. Despite his reluctance, Gregory’s life became the model that he would use to encourage others who were reluctant to take up positions in the active life. Turning now to examine his writings, we will see how Gregory used his own experiences to inform his model for Christian living and leadership.

¹² *Reg.* 1.20.

¹³ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 26.

¹⁴ Müller, 92.

¹⁵ *Reg.* 7.23.

Gregory's Writings

The form and style of Gregory's writings cover a wide range, from *Homiliae in Hiezechielem* and *Moralia*, which focus on specific texts in Scripture, to his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* and his *Dialogia*, which contain instructions and examples for Christian living. This section will briefly look at a variety of Gregory's writings before taking a closer look at the *Regula Pastoralis* in the next section. Looking at these various texts will help us to see a key feature of Gregory's writing, namely the practical nature of his works. Gregory's different writing styles were designed for different audiences and for different purposes, but his theology, as well as his purpose of aiding people in living the Christian life, was consistent throughout.¹⁶ While the *Regula Pastoralis* is the best illustration of his reconciliation of the contemplative and active lives, a brief survey of these other works will show the ideas and purposes of Gregory's writing before turning to examine the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* in greater detail.

Homiliae in Hiezechielem

In chapter two, we saw Gregory's high praise for the contemplative life, looking at the examples of Mary and Martha and seeing Jesus' words to them in his *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*. In that same text Gregory offered praise, albeit somewhat less, for the active life. In Book II, Homily II.9, Gregory wrote:

¹⁶ Kessler, 1336.

Behold Martha's part is *not censured* but Mary's is praised. Nor does He say that Mary has chosen a good part but the best, so that Martha's too was *shown to be good*. But why Mary's is the best is implied when it says: "Which shall not be taken away from her." The active life indeed fails with the body. For who will offer bread to the hungry in the Eternal Kingdom where none goes hungry? Who will give drink to the thirsty where none thirsts? Who will bury the dead where none dies? Therefore the active life is taken away with the present age but the contemplative is begun here that it may be perfected in the Heavenly Kingdom, because the fire of love, which begins to glow here, when it has seen Him Whom it loves, will burn the more brightly in His love. So the contemplative life is not taken away, because it is perfected when removed from the light of the present age.¹⁷ (emphasis mine)

In this we are able to see Gregory's reconciliation of the contemplative and active, but we are also reminded of the tension that is inherent between the two. Gregory did not deny that the monastic life was the "best" life, the life that would be eternal and would bring the greatest fulfillment by experiencing God. Gregory's deep admiration for that life, and indeed his persistent longing for it, was apparent. However, the active life was still "good" and was necessary for the Church to fulfill its role in the world. That Gregory pointed out there will be no need in the "Eternal Kingdom" for anyone to give drink to the thirsty or bury the dead suggests his view of what made up the active life in this world, namely aiding those in need. In other sermons of this text, Gregory suggested that part of the good of the active life was to delay the contemplative until eternity so as to serve in the present.¹⁸ This elevated the active life because it entailed a personal sacrifice of experiencing God now for the benefit of one's neighbor.

¹⁷ HEz. 2.2.9.

¹⁸ HEz., 1.3.11-12.

Moralia

When it came to writing the *Moralia* (*Morals on Job*), both the content and composition of the book illustrate the theme of reconciling the contemplative and active. This was written by Gregory after he left the monastery to serve Pope Pelagius II in Constantinople sometime around 579. On trying to write the *Moralia*, “Gregory tells us that he was under incessant pressure from secular cases, mainly trying to obtain money and troops for his pope in Rome, to use against the Lombards. But he was revived by daily discussions of biblical readings, and after some misgivings he began by reading his first sections on Job to the same monks.”¹⁹ So while representing the needs of Rome at court in Constantinople, Gregory sought to maintain his spiritual focus through reading and discussing Scripture. Therefore the writing of the *Moralia* itself symbolizes the tension between the contemplative and active, between the demands of the duties of a leader and the desire to meditate on Scripture and write.

Dialogia

In an effort to provide pastoral instruction not only for biblical scholars but for a larger Church audience, Gregory wrote his *Dialogia* in which he provided stories of holy men to set examples for Christian living.²⁰ Gregory often looked to Scripture, particularly to the Old Testament, for examples of people who had experienced God’s presence and also served God.²¹ One of the more famous sections of this book is the

¹⁹ Martyn, introduction to *Letters*, 4-5.

²⁰ Kessler, 1341.

²¹ Kessler, 1346. See Kessler’s footnote for more detail.

earliest biography of Benedict of Nursia, which shaped the form of Benedictine monasticism that would become a standard rule across medieval Europe.²²

However, Gregory's models of the Christ life were not limited biblical persons or to monastics. A significant contribution of the *Dialogues* was "Gregory's clear intention to provide an alternative collection of *exempla* of sainthood."²³ It is striking that Gregory "discarded the mould of the martyr-story"²⁴ and instead emphasized the active life of service in his examples, including numerous bishops and several popes. This is consistent with the idea that the purpose of contemplation was to be useful in the active life for the service of the Church. Because the context of Christianity had changed since its legalization in the fourth century, a new model was needed, and Gregory provided this through his reconciliation of the previously dichotomized forms of the Christian life. Gregory used different *exempla*, including ecclesiastical authorities and ascetics, to express his idea that there is diversity and also unity in the Church.²⁵ "There is no single model of holiness, lay, monastic, or clerical. The holy men we meet here belong to all the Church's *ordines*, to a variety of social classes, rich and poor, high and low."²⁶

Gregory's Pastoral Rule

After looking at examples of the union of the contemplative and active in a number of Gregory's writings, we now turn to a detailed study of his *Liber Regulae*

²² Müller, "Gregory the Great and Monasticism," 90.

²³ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 62.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 67.

²⁶ Ibid, 66.

Pastoralis, which gives the clearest evidence of this theme of reconciliation and of its practical application in creating a model for pastoral leadership. The title is translated different ways in English, sometimes referred to as “Book of Pastoral Care” and other times as the “Book of Pastoral Rule.” While the term “pastoral care” is an apt description of the content of the book, as it does discuss how shepherds were to care for their flock, the term “pastoral rule” is more accurate not only because it is a more literal translation of the Latin title, but because the concept of a “rule” for pastors lends itself to the idea of a monastic rule. This better captures the essence of Gregory’s aim in writing the book, for in it, Gregory described not only methods for ministry, but the spiritual disciplines necessary for an effective leader, thus creating a “rule” for pastors.

This book became one of the most read pastoral treatises of the Middle Ages and is Gregory’s most popular and enduring work.²⁷ This was perhaps aided by the more manageable number of pages as compared to his *Moralia*, but was also due in large part to the practical nature of the book. A careful reading of the his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* is essential for catching the soul and spirit of Gregory’s pontificate. In it we find the clearest attempt to bring together the contemplative and active lives in Gregory’s writing. In this union we see Gregory creating a model for Christian leadership that is exemplified by his own life. In later chapters, we will see that his letters and deeds must be interpreted in light of what is found in *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* in order to rightly understand how he lived his active life.

²⁷ Butler, 176.

Gregory wrote *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* shortly after becoming pope, so the pain of leaving the monastic life was still very raw. The book was addressed to John, the Bishop of Ravenna, saying “You reprove me, beloved brother, with a kind and humble intention, for having hoped that by hiding myself I might flee the burdens of pastoral care.”²⁸ He went on to explain his intention for writing the book, so that those who might pursue positions of Church leadership would be aware of the burdens of office, and that those who already had positions would recognize the weight and importance of their task.²⁹

Part I: Concerning the Qualifications

In Part I, Gregory addressed the requirements for assuming ecclesiastical office. First, Gregory established the good of the contemplation, which, as discussed in chapter two, he viewed to be the highest form of the Christian life. He recognized that it was essential for one to experience God in order to be able to rightly interpret Scripture. However, from *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* we see that he believed it was necessary for many who desired the contemplative life to leave it and take up positions of leadership in the Church, because it was precisely those men who had spent time in contemplation and seasons of spiritual formation that were qualified and equipped to lead. Addressing the contemplative life, Gregory wrote:

For there are several who possess incredible virtues and who are exalted by great talents for training others; men who are spotless in the pursuit of

²⁸ *Liber*, preface.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

chastity, stout in the vigor of fasting, satiated in the feasts of doctrine, humble in the long-suffering of patience, erect in the fortitude of authority, tender in the grace of kindness, and strict in the severity of judgment. To be certain, if they refuse to accept a position of spiritual leadership when they are called, they forfeit the majority of their gifts—gifts which they received not for themselves only, but also for others. When these men contemplate their own spiritual advantages and do not consider anyone else, they lose these goods because they desire to keep them for themselves.³⁰

Here Gregory had strong words for those who were too concerned with their own “spiritual advantages” to engage in active service of the Church, suggesting that the very gifts that they enjoyed would be taken away if they were not used for others. Precisely because these individuals were schooled in the virtues of the contemplative, already trained in humility and “satiated in the feasts of doctrine,” they were equipped to be leaders. However, the contemplative life was the “good and straight road” to eternal life, quicker than the twisting roads of the world³¹ and Gregory could readily identify with such reluctance to leave it.

Gregory was not alone in his reluctance. Many of those who were well equipped for leadership resisted the idea of ordination, preferring instead to stay in the life of the monastery.³² Conversely, he found that those who were willing to seek ordination and take on these responsibilities were often inadequate for the task.³³ So while Gregory addressed these reluctant monastics, he also had a word of caution for those who were eager to seek positions of leadership and authority. He wrote, “No one presumes to teach

³⁰ *Liber*, 1.5.

³¹ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 69.

³² Demacopoulos, introduction, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*

an art that he has not first mastered through study. How foolish it is therefore for the inexperienced to assume pastoral authority when the care of souls is the art of arts.”³⁴ By this, Gregory suggested that spiritual formation was necessary prior to seeking a Church office. This spiritual formation was best gained in the contemplative life:

The active life of the leader ought to transcend that of the people in proportion to how the life of a shepherd outshines that of his flock. Necessarily, then, the one who is so highly regarded that the people are called his flock is bound to consider how important it is that he retain a life of righteousness. It is necessary, therefore, that he should be pure in thought, exemplary in conduct, discerning in silence, profitable in speech, a compassionate neighbor to everyone, *superior to all in contemplation*, a humble companion to the good, and firm in the zeal of righteousness against the vices of sinners. *He must not relax his care for the internal life while he is occupied by external concerns, nor should he relinquish what is prudent of external matters so as to focus on things internal.*³⁵
(emphasis mine)

These qualifications of the ecclesiastical leader in the active life had a distinctly monastic flavor. Gregory explicitly stated here the importance of contemplation and the focus on the internal. We have already seen how this emphasis on the internal aided Gregory in his active life as pope. Gregory saw the leader as one who “must be dead to the passions of the flesh and live a spiritual life. He must have no regard for worldly prosperity and never cower in the face of adversity. He must desire the internal life only.”³⁶ This sounds very much like the purgation that was needed for the contemplative life— to retreat from the world and its temptations, to subjugate the flesh, to focus on the internal. It is almost a “monasticized” office, to borrow Richards’ term again.

³⁴ *Liber*, 1.1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Liber*, 1.10.

Part II: Concerning the Life of the Pastor

In Part II of *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, Gregory shifted his focus from qualifications to how the leader should live the active life and warnings regarding the burdens of that life. One of the most significant burdens of the active life of leadership was the temptation of pride, which Gregory addressed in Part II as well. According to Gregory, not only should a leader have these experiences of spiritual formation prior to obtaining office, but he must continue to practice them once in office. Gregory gave the following description of the life of an active leader:

And in a state of elevation, he raises the eyes of his heart to invisible things, but he nevertheless bends to the hidden infirmities of the weak. In contemplation, he transcends heaven, yet in his constant concern for those in his care he does not desert the couch of the carnal, because being joined in charity to the highest and lowest things at once (though for himself he is greatly transported to the highest by the power of the Spirit), he is content, in his piety, to be weak for the weak.³⁷

This state of elevation was the position of authority of the leader. In it, there could not be not an abandonment of the principles of contemplation, but rather a union between those principles and serving the needs of others, being simultaneously “joined... to the highest and lowest.” This was also reflected in Gregory’s own life and his efforts as pope to continue to seek moments of contemplation in midst of caring for his flock. This understanding of Gregory is essential for rightly interpreting his actions as pope, as we will see in the following chapters.

³⁷ Ibid, 2.5.

Gregory's instructions for those seeking a pastoral office continued with a warning of the danger that possessing authority could lead one into pride and sin if he was not prepared:

For no one is able to acquire humility while in a position of authority if he did not refrain from pride when in a position of subjection. He does not know to flee from praise when it abounds if he yearned for it when it was absent, just as no one is able to conquer his greed when he is given the role of sustaining many if he was unable to sustain himself on his own resources. Therefore, let everyone discover what he is from his past life, so that the fantasy of his thoughts does not deceive him because of his desire to lead.³⁸

Though Gregory did not say explicitly here that the "past life" to which he refers is the monastic one, it is not difficult to see how previous monastic experience would be ideal for preparing someone for a position of authority. The contemplative life was one of "subjection" and was absent of praise. It offered the lessons of humility that Gregory felt were needed before assuming responsibility and authority. If one should obtain an ecclesiastical office unprepared and conduct himself in a false manner while shepherding God's people, the consequences would be grave:

No one does more harm in the Church than he who has the title or rank of holiness and acts perversely... Whoever, therefore, gives off the appearance of sanctity but destroys another by his words or example, it would be better for him that his earthly acts, demonstrated by worldly habits, would bind him to death than for his sacred office to be a source for the imitation of vice in another. Indeed, his punishment in hell would be less terrible if he fell alone.³⁹

The leader who did not conduct himself with humility was at risk for not only being held accountable for his own sin, but for inducing sin in others. The gravity of the

³⁸ Ibid, 1.9.

³⁹ Ibid, 1.2.

responsibility of leadership made it imperative that the right people were in place with the right qualifications.

Part Three: How the Spiritual Director Should Teach

The first part of the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* specifically addressed the qualifications for leaders and the second part addressed burdens and risks involved. The third and longest part of the book focused on practical methods for teaching and leading the flock. This section contains one of the most unique pieces in all of Gregory's writing, in which he listed "pairs" of people, that is opposites, seventy-two in all, and instructed the pastor on how to guide and admonish each person.⁴⁰ This list included "men and women; young and old; rich and poor" as well as "the obstinate and fickle; the gluttonous and the abstinent; those who give mercifully and those who steal from others."⁴¹ Sometimes the advice was only a few sentences, such as "The young are to be advised one way, the old another, because the former are, for the most part, led to improvement by severe admonition, while the latter are more compelled to better deeds through gentle petition."⁴² Others, such as the patient and the impatient, took several pages to cover.⁴³

These pairs highlight two important elements of Gregory's thought. First, it illustrates his understanding of the unity in the midst of the diversity of the Church.⁴⁴ Second, it gives another example of the practicality of Gregory's theology. For Gregory,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 3.1., and Demacopoulos, introduction, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 3.2.

⁴³ Ibid, 3.9.

⁴⁴ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 73.

the primary goal of the contemplative experience, of biblical exegesis, and of his own writings was to give “pastoral access to the world of the Bible.”⁴⁵ The practicality of Gregory’s thought is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his pastoral care. Markus summarizes this well:

Time and again he would dwell on how a pastor should treat his flock, how, especially, he should distinguish the humble from the proud, how to be flexible and to adapt his style in speech and action, his mildness or his severity, to the various differing needs of his people. The constant preoccupation with this theme indicates the importance it had for Gregory throughout his life. Working on a systematic exposition of it in the *Regulae Pastoralis* was the therapy that brought about this reconciliation to his office, and became his profession of faith for the new life he now followed.⁴⁶

This willingness to adapt to the various needs of different people also appeared in Gregory’s instructions to the monks he sent as missionaries to England, encouraging them to build the Church in a way that suited the needs of English people. This will be explored further in chapter five.

Leadership in the Church

In this final section, we see the culmination of Gregory’s reconciliation between the contemplative and active lives in the practical application of using his model for pastoral leadership. In Part III of *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, one of the pairs of opposites which Gregory addressed was the difference between subordinates and leaders. This section of Gregory’s writing reveals a great deal about his attitude toward authority, and

⁴⁵ Kessler, 1337.

⁴⁶ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 20-21.

this should be borne in mind when examining his actions as pope, as we will do in the next two chapters. Gregory, once again, expressed the importance of the leader's responsibilities:

For leaders ought to know that if they ever do anything wrong, they will deserve as many deaths as they engender among their subordinates. It is necessary, therefore, that they guard themselves that much more carefully from sin, because the evil that they commit will kill others also... Indeed, whoever is placed over others as an example for living is admonished not only to be vigilant of himself, but also to rouse his friend. For it is not sufficient to be vigilant of one living well if he does not remove from the torpor of sin those persons over whom he presides... Therefore, those who lead should be advised to examine everything carefully and to struggle to become creatures of heaven.⁴⁷

This high calling of leadership echoes Gregory's words from Part II, where he explained that it was the duty of the pastor to serve his neighbor by teaching what he has learned in his contemplation.

Whoever, therefore, pursues so completely the beauty of his Maker as to neglect the care of his neighbors or, conversely, whoever attends to the care of his neighbors so as to grow listless in divine love (whichever of these two he neglects), he does not know what it means to have twice-dyed scarlet in the adornment of the Ephod⁴⁸

Gregory embraced the words of Christ to both love God and love one's neighbor. As we saw in chapter two, to pursue the love of God is the way of contemplation, and to love one's neighbor is to live the active life. Gregory proposed that these not be mutually exclusive but that they be brought together. Given what this high view demands of a leader, it becomes clear why Gregory would have wanted to avoid being in a position of

⁴⁷ *Liber*, 3.4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 2.3.

leadership, where he would be responsible not only for his own actions and his own soul, but for the actions and souls of those he led.

In addition to setting high standards for leaders, Gregory also had a warning for the other half of this pairing, the subordinates:

Subordinates should be advised not to judge the lives of their leaders too quickly, even if they witness reprehensible actions. Other wise, what they rightly judge as evil might sink them through the impulse of pride into the depths. They should be advised that when they consider the sins of men in power, they do not become too bold against them. Even if some of these sins are serious, in their own judgment they should be so constrained by the fear of the Divine that they do not refuse to bear the yoke of reverence under them.⁴⁹

Gregory again cautioned against pride, and here his warning to subordinates is reminiscent of his instructions that humility must be learned while in “subjugation” before assuming a position of authority. As the next chapter will discuss, Gregory saw himself as the subordinate of the emperor, and he was cautious not to criticize the man whom God had put in authority over him, unless the leader was causing harm to those under Gregory’s care. Gregory believed that one should not strive for greater power or resist those in authority unless absolutely necessary. “In all that the pastor says and does, *prodesse*, to be of use, not *praesse*, to be in charge, is the supreme imperative.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid, 3.4.

⁵⁰ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 31.

Conclusion

As the following chapters move into examining Gregory's active life— that is, his role as pope— it is important to continue to view his actions in the context of what we have seen regarding his thought in the last two chapters. It must be borne in mind that he was a man deeply committed to monasticism, not only because it was how he lived for a number of years, but because he saw it as essential for the spiritual formation necessary for qualified leaders of the Church. His emphasis on the sin of pride and its dangers should always be remembered when seeking to understand the administrative and political dealings that he had as pope. Markus explains Gregory's vision for the way in which the contemplative life would shape leaders of the Church:

He wished his fellow-bishops and his clergy to become foci of Christian living like them; to be *praedicatores*, channels for the power of the Gospel, rooted in God's world by a life in which the painful tensions between action and contemplation were held in a fine equilibrium. His *Regula pastoralis*, a classic equally of 'spiritual' and of 'political' literature, created a model in which not only the active and the contemplative ideals but also the acquired status of the Italian *viri Dei* of the *Dialogues* and the bestowed status of the *rector* were integrated."⁵¹

By this, Markus suggests that Gregory's aim was to encourage the union of authority with holiness in every area of the Church, both in the monastery and in the hierarchy of leadership.⁵² The examples of holy men found in the *Dialogia*, which included both monastics and clerics, as well as the model for leaders described in the *Regula* demonstrate Gregory's desire that everyone lead a holy life of service.

⁵¹ Markus, "The Latin Fathers," 122.

⁵² Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 67.

This attempt to unify opposites, both in Gregory's efforts to reconcile the contemplative and active lives and in his writing which brought together the opposite natures of people to whom he ministered, will show itself again in Gregory's wrestling with the relationship between ecclesiastical and temporal authority. Once again Gregory attempted to bring two seemingly dichotomous positions together to work in unity rather than polarity. Gregory also instructed that "The spiritual director should be first in service..."⁵³ In the next two chapters, we will see how Gregory took his own instructions to heart, living his active life as pope in service both to his flock in Rome and to the Church throughout the Empire. We will see the context in which Gregory called himself the *Servus servorum Dei*, or "Servant of the servants of God," a title which has its roots in Gregory's ideas of pastoral care.

⁵³ *Liber*, 2.1.

Chapter Four: The Reconciliation of Ecclesiastical and Temporal Authority

Having seen in the previous chapter the way in which Gregory reconciled himself to his new life outside of the monastery and his role as pope by bringing together the contemplative and active lives and developing a theology that brought the two together both in individuals and in the Church, we now turn our attention to the active life of Gregory to see how this union affected his papacy. The second chapter established the importance that Gregory placed on spiritual formation through the monastic life and the war with the sin of pride both in himself and in others. The third chapter showed how Gregory used this idea of monastic spiritual formation to call leaders to a life of holiness and to call holy men to roles of leadership, always maintaining his conviction that pride was the greatest enemy of men and the Church. In this chapter, we will examine another great dichotomy that Gregory faced, one between the spiritual and temporal worlds. To do this we will turn our focus to Gregory's active life by examining his pontificate in order to see the way in which his monasticism was brought to bear on his actions as pope. In this chapter, we will look specifically at Gregory's activities in Rome as a local administrator in a time of crisis, at his relationship with the Empire, and his controversy with the Bishop of Constantinople. Looking at these in light of the previous chapters, we will see that Gregory's actions in the temporal realm were not an attempt to expand the power of the papacy, as some have suggested. While it is true that Gregory took on traditionally state roles, such as bringing food and supplies into the city and negotiating

peace with enemies of the state, Gregory did not do these things to advance his own power. Rather, these things were done in a way that was consistent with Gregory's views of ecclesiastical leaders as servants and subjects of the emperor.

While Gregory's theological and pastoral writings, such as the *Homiliae in Hiezecheilem* and the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, give us insight into his theology, his letters are the best source of information on his role as an administrator and his active life in which he served the Church, the people of Rome, and the nations of western Europe. We will now turn our attention to his letters and what they reveal regarding his actions and how this reconciliation of the contemplative and active lives looked in his own life. We will see how the "both/and" of Gregory, as a Roman and a Christian, an ancient and medieval man, a monk and a pope, will impact his policy and shape his influence. His active life included the administration of the Church in the West as well as the city of Rome, dealing with the recurring threat of Lombard invasion, and missions to Gaul and England.¹ His letters are the primary source this information and in their most recent edition, John C. Martyn introduces them this way:

The letters provide a detailed picture of a man of God, now contemplative, now a just and tactful administrator, now a reformer and judge, ever humble, ever friendly and charitable, except when severity was needed, and ever working for a better, fairer society, controlled by an united Church, centered on the sacred presence of Saint Peter, the prince of the apostles, who appears noticeable throughout all fourteen books.²

¹ Martyn, preface x.

² Ibid.

This chapter will take into consideration how various instances of Gregory's active life as pontiff reflect the themes of his monasticism. These represent the very cares of the world which Gregory so feared would remove him from God's presence and caused him to lament his departure from the monastic life. Yet because of his reconciliation of the contemplative and active lives, Gregory was able to live his active life in a way that was consistent with his commitment to the Christian life of service.

Problems in Rome

In October of 590, shortly following his election, Gregory wrote to John of Constantinople, and did not mince words regarding his feelings about his new office:

For I know with what ardor, with what zeal you wished to escape the burdens of the episcopate, and yet you did not prevent the same burdens of the episcopate from being imposed on me. And so it is certain that you do not love me as much as you love yourself, for you wanted me to undertake those burdens that you did not want to impose on yourself. But because, while unworthy and in firm, I have taken on an old and very broken down ship... I ask by our almighty Lord that in this danger of mine you stretch forth the hand of your prayer. For you are able to pray all the more earnestly, as you are situated further away from the confusion of the tribulations from which we suffer in this country.³

This sounds very much like Gregory's letters in which he describes his longing to return to the monastic life, only here he was specifically lamenting the challenges facing him in Rome. He was the captain of a "broken down ship," and to aid him he sought the prayers of his friend, noting that the Bishop of Constantinople was in a better position to pray

³ *Reg*, 1.4. This letter was written to the same Bishop of Constantinople, John the Faster, with whom Gregory would later disagree over the use of the title "ecumenical patriarch."

than Gregory, not because he was removed to a monastery, but because he was at least removed from the trials of Rome.

The context of Gregory's life and his papacy is important to understand in order to correctly interpret Gregory's actions. His ascension to the papacy came at a time when Rome was falling apart. The city was under siege by the Lombards repeatedly, and the plague came again and again and took the lives of many while others fled the city.⁴ In fact when Gregory's predecessor as pope died of the plague, Gregory quite literally stepped into the void, as the city had few political leaders and little infrastructure.⁵ He took the lead in the political and state affairs of the legendary city, not to usurp power, as there was hardly anyone to be usurped, but to serve the people of the city, who were his sheep and in desperate need.

Feeding Rome

One of the most serious threats to the city of Rome during Gregory's lifetime was the threat of famine. As pope, Gregory brought in food and resources from the papal estates in the countryside, to the point of aggravating and irritating people outside of the city because of the amount being diverted to Rome.⁶ These activities of Gregory's are significant because Gregory was acting as the de facto ruler of the city, which resulted in an ecclesiastical officer assuming a great deal of temporal authority in a major city of the

⁴ John Wilkinson, *The Social Welfare Program of Pope Gregory the Great* (New York; Fordham University, 1989), 9, 15.

⁵ Markus, "Gregory's Europe," 21.

⁶ Wilkinson, 19.

Empire.⁷ Due in large part to the situation of the times, the Church was increasingly assuming responsibility and thereby authority over temporal matters out of pure necessity. Markus notes that “Churchmen now had functions of unprecedented scope, and with them came increased exposure of the Church to imperial interest and legislation.”⁸⁹ However, this increase in scope and function was not necessarily a grasp for power. When Gregory arranged for food to be brought into the city and for the maintenance of the city’s defenses in the face of invaders, he did so not to usurp the authority of the city government but because there was no city government infrastructure to do it for him.¹⁰ While defense was clearly a state responsibility, the act of importing grain had also been a historically state endeavor, going back to the days of the Roman republic, when grain was brought in to be sold at a lower price to the poor.¹¹ Yet John Wilkinson, in his study *The Social Welfare Program of Gregory the Great*, notes that Gregory not only assumed this formerly state role of bringing grain into the city, but he went beyond it, applying the principles of Christian *caritas* to giving not only grain but other foods and supplies from Church revenues to the poor, widowed, and orphaned.¹² Understood in this way, Gregory’s expansion of the role of Bishop of Rome was an

⁷ Ibid, 6-9 In his study, Wilkinson gives the history of this activity of bringing grain into the city for people to buy, and points out that it was a duty of the state from the days of the Roman republic. Wilkinson situates this shift in responsibility for the people of the city from the emperor to the Bishop of Rome in the context of the Lombard attacks beginning in the mid sixth century.

⁸ Markus “The Latin Fathers,” 117.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wilkinson, 127-133. Wilkinson notes that this was not unique to the pope or the city of Rome. As the formerly urbanized Empire became increasingly rural, a feature of the medieval period in Europe, the towns and cities became increasingly dependent on the church, which was urban by nature of its own organization, to provide this type of support for the towns.

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹² Ibid, 46-48.

application of Jesus' instructions to St. Peter to "feed my sheep," in this case a literal application.

Defending Rome

In addition to bringing in supplies of grain, perhaps one of the most striking examples of Gregory assuming the role of a civic leader was his negotiation of peace with the invading Lombards. The threat of the Lombards persisted for all of Gregory's lifetime, and in fact he had been sent to Constantinople by Pope Pelagius II in 579 to request aid from the emperor to deal with the threat.¹³ Therefore, Gregory was doing nothing new in stepping in for the lack of imperial presence in the city's defense.¹⁴ However, because Gregory was pope and not merely an imperial official, he went beyond the defense of the city and saw himself as the bishop of the Lombards, considering their conversion to be his responsibility. Here again, Gregory assumed a civic responsibility but carried it out as a Christian bishop, bringing his theology to bear on his policy. Gregory went beyond staving off war to envision a missionary outreach to the Lombards.¹⁵ In one letter to a deacon in Constantinople, Gregory revealed his struggle with being both a Roman citizen and a Christian bishop: "...If I his [the emperor's] servant had wanted to be involved in the deaths of even the Lombards, today the Lombard people would have neither a king nor dukes nor counts, and would be divided in utmost confusion. But because I fear God, I am afraid to involve myself in the death of

¹³ Martyn, 30.

¹⁴ Wilkinson, 130.

¹⁵ Martyn, 31, and *Reg.* 1.30.

any human at all.”¹⁶ Here Gregory not only deferred to the emperor by noting that he was the emperor’s servant, but he also suggested that he owed a higher obedience to God and therefore recognized that even the Lombards should receive the Gospel.

Some scholars have seen these, along with Gregory’s other missionary activities which will be discussed in the next chapter, as a move by Gregory to begin to expand the influence of Rome in the West and to move away from the Empire in the East. However, Markus argues that Gregory “was prepared to envisage a permanent Lombard settlement in Italy as a pastoral opportunity, not as an ingredient in a Western Christian society alternative to the unity of the Empire.”¹⁷ What then, did Gregory believe was the appropriate relationship between civil and ecclesiastical authority? Much has been written on Gregory’s conception of power and authority in papal administration, but often these studies give only passing mention to Gregory’s time as a monk and to his pastoral writings. As this paper has already argued, there is a connection between the two. Having discussed Gregory’s monasticism and pastoral views in previous chapters, a brief examination of Gregory’s understanding of church and state is necessary in order to see the connection. It will be shown that the political philosophy of Gregory’s active life was consistent with the pastoral philosophy of his contemplative life. Examining Gregory’s understanding of the relationship of the papacy to the Empire will give context to Gregory’s actions discussed above and will show that in feeding the poor and defending the city, Gregory was not attempting to move away from the Empire.

¹⁶ *Reg.* 5.6.

¹⁷ Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 34.

Gregory and the Empire

Interdependence of Church and State

It is important to understand Gregory's actions in the arena of civil administration in the context of the situation in Rome, so that it is not misread as a pope looking to expand his authority wherever possible. Gregory consistently showed himself to be a supporter of the emperor as the temporal authority. Instead of grasping for power, Gregory's thought on the relationship between the church and the state here demonstrates once again the theme of bringing together, in this case the sacred and secular. "Gregory was well aware—the point is especially clear in his correspondence—that ecclesiastical and civil administration remained distinct, though overlapping. In his political vocabulary, however, he was moving towards a world in which sacred and secular were apt to melt into each other."¹⁸ This union stands out in contrast to Gregory's predecessors, particularly Augustine, who distinguished between the "cities" of Babylon and Jerusalem, that is drawing a sharp distinction between the secular and the religious in terms of authority. Not only in Augustine's thought, but in that of Gregory's predecessor Gelasius as well there is a distinction to be drawn between church and state, sacred and secular. Markus contends, "Gelasius had been able to drive a wedge between the sacred authority of the clergy and the power of secular rulers; but there was no room for such division in Gregory's world. The Church had become a public institution of the Empire and the Empire itself was deeply and thoroughly 'ecclesiastified', if I may be permitted the

¹⁸ Markus, "The Latin Fathers," 120.

barbarism.”¹⁹ Therefore, in a sense, because the Empire had been converted to Christianity, the Church now shared in the authority and responsibilities of the Empire. This was made possible by the change in the political and religious climate of Gregory’s day, in which there was no need for such distinction because the paganism of the culture had been completely transformed or disappeared. “The secular traditions of Rome no longer offered a real intellectual or moral option and its social and ceremonial expressions claimed no allegiance.... The secular past had drained away from Rome and Gregory’s Italy.”²⁰

Indeed, Carol Straw expresses this in “Gregory’s Politics: Theory and Practice,” saying:

As the church changed externally, the secular power changed internally: each now acquires a duality of spiritual and carnal qualities. This double ambivalence succeeds the original polarity and antagonism between church and prince.... Temporal and spiritual need not be opposites; they can be reconciled and even continuous. Thus with the conversion of princes, the aims of church and state need no longer be at odds, instead they can mutually support each other.²¹

Once again Gregory was working to reconcile what had previously been at odds. As with most of Gregory’s views, this was one spread over his writings and letters. However, the most concise statement of the relationship between the ecclesiastical and temporal powers can be found in his *Moralia* in the exegesis of Job 39, in which Gregory saw the state represented by the rhinoceros whose horn represented pride, and who was restrained

¹⁹ Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 22.

²⁰ Markus, “Latin Fathers,” 118.

²¹ Straw, “Gregory’s Politics,” 53-54.

by the “crib” which was Scripture and the “band” which was the Church.²² “The story of Job and the rhinoceros illustrates the humble interdependence that should join church and state together.”²³ The state power (the rhinoceros) was proud and must be humbled. But the prelate, that is, the Church, must remember that it was God who humbled the rhinoceros, not Job, and so this humbles the Church too. The state was humbled by acknowledging that its power comes from God and therefore the state owed protection to His Church.

Church and State at odds

While Gregory saw the relationship between church and state as one of interdependence, each to be used by God in a different way and to work with one another, there were times when church and state were at odds. In those instances, what did Gregory believe the Church should do? Was it the place of the Church to correct the temporal authority? One of Gregory’s letters to emperor Maurice in 595 addresses these questions:

But let our Lordship not be over quick to be displeased with the priests, thanks to his earthly power, but with excellent consideration, because of Him whose servants they are, let him be their master, in such a way that he even pays them the reverence they deserve. For in Holy Scripture, priests are sometimes called gods, and sometimes angels... What wonder, then, if your Piety should deign to honor those whom God himself attributes honor in his Holy Scripture, while calling them either angels or even Gods²⁴

²² *Mor.* 31.1.2-4, Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 56, and Straw, “Gregory’s Politics,” 51.

²³ Straw, “Gregory’s Politics,” 51.

²⁴ *Reg.* 5.36.

Here Gregory seemed to imply that it was not right for the emperor, and therefore the state, to judge the priest, and therefore the church. Later in the medieval period his words were used to suggest this very thing.²⁵ Walter Ullman, a 20th century scholar of the medieval papacy, agreed that this is what Gregory was implying and cited this as evidence for the argument that Gregory was turning his focus toward the West and withdrawing from the Empire.²⁶ Yet for these statements to be understood, they must be taken in the context of the letter, and even this letter put into context of Gregory's instructions in other letters. First, in the letter, Gregory was writing to defend himself against accusations of being "naive," and "simple," and for "having lied." These accusations were made by Ariulf, the Duke of Spoleto, on the occasion of another Lombard attack on Rome. Earlier in this same letter, Gregory wrote "And indeed if the captivity of my land was not increasing every moment of every day, I should happily keep quiet about my being despised and laughed at. But this afflicts me strongly, that while I endure a charge of falsehood, so Italy is led captive each day beneath the Lombard's yoke..."²⁷ So we see that the occasion for Gregory speaking out in his defense and suggesting that the emperor was wrong to judge the "gods" of God in this way was not due to his own pride but in the defense of his flock. This is entirely consistent with the advice that Gregory gave in another letter to his sub-deacon Peter four years earlier in 591, in which he said:

²⁵ Ullman, 39-40. Ullman suggested that these statements "gain[ed] a very wide currency" and he did not imply that he thought the use was contrary to Gregory's intention.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Reg.* 5.36.

However, the noble laymen and the glorious preator should love you for your humility, and not shrink from you due to your arrogance. And yet when you realize that those men are perhaps doing some unjust deeds against any destitute people, then turn your humility into pride at once, and always present yourself as their subject when they behave well, but as their enemy when they behave badly.²⁸

Gregory here instructed his sub-deacon to be humble unless it was causing harm to the innocent people over whom he had authority. This is consistent with what has already been seen regarding Gregory's concept of authority and responsibility for church leaders. In this view, Gregory's words to the emperor should be seen as Gregory's using the "pride" of his position and the suggestion in Scripture that priests ought not to be judged not to defend himself but to defend the people for whom he was responsible that were suffering from the siege of the Lombard invaders.

Controversy over "Ecumenical Pontiff"

Traditional Interpretation of the Controversy

There are many incidents that could be examined to illustrate Gregory's active life in the temporal administration of Rome and its relationship to the Church, but to chronicle all of these events is beyond our scope here. However, there is one particularly notable incident that should be discussed at length not only because of what it reveals about Gregory's concepts of the authority and power of the papacy, but also because its misinterpretation in past scholarship has caused a misinterpretation about much of

²⁸ *Reg.* 1.38a.

Gregory's papacy. This is the conflict over the Bishop of Constantinople's use of the term "*oikoumenikos*" or "ecumenical patriarch," Gregory's denunciation of his use of the title, and Gregory's use of the title *Servus servorum Dei*, (*Servant of the servants of God*).

One school of thought, again represented by Walter Ullman, has suggested that Gregory ignored the use of the title "ecumenical patriarch" by John the Faster, Bishop of Constantinople, until 595 C.E., just before Gregory sent missionaries to England. Therefore, according to Ullman, Gregory's sudden denunciation of a title that had been in use for some time was a calculated move to begin distancing himself from the Empire as he turned his attention westward. Ullman argued that Gregory rejected the Bishop of Constantinople's claim to primacy represented by the title because it threatened Gregory's ability to claim precisely that same position later in the West. This view interpreted Gregory's own self-given title, in which he styled himself *Servus servorum Dei*, as a somewhat false humility, actually intended by Gregory to elevate himself over his "rival" in Constantinople. According to Ullman, "The assumption by Gregory I of the title 'servus servorum Dei' is an inverted exaltation of his office."²⁹

Yet this would seem to be wholly inconsistent with what has already been seen regarding Gregory's views on humility and pride, as well as his understanding of Christian leadership. Indeed, to read Gregory's own words regarding leaders and servants his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* shows this idea of seeing himself as a servant to be genuine. He held leaders to an exceptionally high standard of service, and precisely because he

²⁹ Ullman, 37 f.n. 5. Ullman did not suggest a reason why Gregory had begun using this title in 591 and how that might be related to the conflict with Constantinople in 595.

expected them to have gone through the process of spiritual formation through contemplation, he expected that they should be this kind of servant leader. This is why, as seen in chapter three, Gregory wanted servants to become leaders instead of withdrawing, and for leaders to go away into contemplation to become servants. In doing so, they would become better followers of Christ and better fulfill their roles in the Church. Therefore, for Gregory to call himself *Servus servorum Dei* does not ring false because it is consistent with his own model for what an ecclesiastical officer ought to be.

Alternative Interpretations

Ullman's argument has been so widespread in the study of the medieval papacy in the last century that nearly all scholarship addresses his claims in one way or another. More recent scholarship rejects Ullman's argument, and as the evidence in this paper suggests, Ullman's interpretation seems inconsistent with Gregory's view of the office of pope, his understanding of a bishop's role as a shepherd and a servant, and his rigorous efforts to root out the sin of pride in the Church and his own life.

Scholars have suggested other reasons for Gregory's objection to the Bishop of Constantinople's use of the term "ecumenical patriarch." According to Martyn, Gregory's main objection was not the title itself, which others had used in reference to the Bishop of Constantinople, but to the Bishop's own use of the title in reference to himself. Thus Gregory was condemning his *prideful* use of the term, as it was "thereby jeopardizing the 'collegiate' structure of the patriarchs, upon which the basis of unity

within the Church was founded.”³⁰ Martyn further suggests that Gregory’s condemnation of the title was not to defend himself but to defend all bishops who might be offended by the term. Markus disputes Ullman’s interpretation that this was a sudden objection to a term long in use and therefore an attempt to withdraw Rome from the Empire or assert the authority of the papacy. Markus explains:

... it is evident that Gregory’s objection to the title was of long standing and not elicited by the project of the [English] mission. In any case, however, his implacable detestation of the ‘proud and pestiferous title’ had nothing to do with the *principatus* of the Roman Church, and can therefore have no bearing on its westward extension. Whatever he thought the title meant, it was something that could not be claimed for the Roman Church any more than it could be claimed for Constantinople... What the Constantinopolitan claim injures is not, in the first place, Rome’s *principatus* but the status of each individual bishop— and that would be equally injured if Rome were to claim the offending title.³¹

In this way, Markus sees Gregory’s opposition to the claim not as a defense of his own power or a grasp for still more power, but as a defense of all bishops under the imperial rule. “The *res publica christiana* meant for him, as for all his contemporaries, the Christian Roman Empire ruled by the emperor at Constantinople.”³² Indeed, Gregory’s letters reflect that he affirmed his position as a subject of the emperor, and in the next chapter we will see that his vision for the westward expansion of Christianity included a vision for the westward expansion of the Empire. Furthermore, Gregory’s acceptance of the emperor’s position of secular authority over him is consistent with the understanding

³⁰ Martyn, 75.

³¹ Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 32- 33.

³² Ibid, 34.

of leadership presented in *Liber Regula Pastoralis*, in which Gregory cautioned subjects against criticizing their leaders.³³

Given this context of the dispute, there is no reason found in Gregory's words or actions to interpret his title *Servus servorum Dei* as anything but genuine, and to see it as anything other than an expression of his hope for the future of the Apostolic See. Putting Gregory's words and actions into the context of his writings and other activities suggests a genuine desire on his part that no patriarch, including himself, would be elevated over others.

Yet this should also not be misunderstood as a rejection by Gregory of Rome's primacy. Neither Martyn nor Markus argue that Gregory did not see Rome's primacy as part of the succession of St. Peter and a right of the holder of the keys to bind and to loose.³⁴ Gregory upheld the authority of other bishops, but also believed that only the See of Rome could claim apostolic succession, and therefore it was the "head of all the churches."³⁵ This power was, for Gregory, to be used as a sort of appeals court to settle disputes and not something to be flaunted or exalted above other bishops of the Church.³⁶ Instead, Gregory placed an emphasis on the responsibility of the successor of Saint Peter to "feed my sheep," as Christ instructed Peter in John 21:15, and used his position as pope to encourage other patriarchs in their struggles.³⁷ Power and authority were to be

³³ *Liber*, 3.4.

³⁴ *Reg.* 1.24, 1.29, 1.30, 4.41, 5.39, 6.5, 6.55, 11.27 and Martyn, 75.

³⁵ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 162 and *Reg.* 13.49.

³⁶ *Reg.* 3.6 and 4.41. In one such case (*Reg.* 3.6), Gregory wrote to John, Bishop of Prima Justiniana, in 592, chastising him for his handling of a dispute, voiding the sentence given by John, and giving his own sentence "by the authority of Saint Peter, the prince of the apostles."

³⁷ Martyn, 74, 76.

used to serve in a manner consistent with the kind of leader Gregory described in *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*.

Conclusion

Gregory's actions as pope, both as an administrator for the city of Rome and as a subject of the emperor in Constantinople reflect his views on leadership and authority expressed in his pastoral writings and letters. Gregory neither reached for power, nor shied from using it when necessary. His goal was always to preserve the Church and protect his people. The increasingly influential role of ecclesiastical offices in temporal matters was a result of the breakdown of the Empire, not a part of a plan to expand the Church's power. His actions feeding and defending Rome as well as his behavior toward the emperor and the Bishop of Constantinople all give evidence to the fact that Gregory used this authority in a manner that was consistent with his theology and spirituality.

To accept the previously held view that Gregory had a sort of false pretense about calling himself the *Servus servorum Dei* would lend itself to interpreting his missionary activity under a similarly false pretense. One might be tempted, given the outcome of its role in solidifying Rome as the center of western Christianity in the coming centuries, to see that this was Gregory's aim all along, to move his power base westward. However, as we will see, this was not Gregory's motivation, but rather an unintended byproduct, a providential paradox. Instead, the missionary endeavor was an effort on his part to live out the calling to serve God's people and expand God's kingdom. We will see in the following chapter how this emphasis on the autonomy, if not equality, of each bishop was

consistent with Gregory's attitude toward the Churches in the West and the missionaries he sent to England.

Chapter Five:
Gregory's Active Life and Missionary Activity

Gregory's missionary endeavors were among the most successful activities of his papacy. Markus observed that "Missionary activity was one of the preoccupations which formed a continuous thread throughout Gregory's pontificate, and may even, according to legend, have ante-dated his accession to the papacy."¹ His attention to the conversion of the western people came at a time when the Latin Church was drifting from the Empire in the east, though, as the last chapter showed, Gregory himself made no effort to separate from the Empire and saw himself as its subject. Also, the African Church was moving toward independence and increasingly distinguishing itself from Rome.² Yet, as this chapter will discuss, while Gregory's missionary endeavor was not motivated by the desire to assert Rome's primacy, it ultimately played a key role in the establishment of Rome as the center of Latin Christianity as it moved north into Europe and away from north Africa and the Mediterranean. Hindsight shows that the west was the future of the Roman Church, and though Gregory could not have known this, he played an important part in making it so. This is perhaps the greatest paradox of his papacy: Gregory's missions secured the position of the Roman See as the central authority for the European Church in the Middle Ages, yet Gregory did not send these missionaries in order to advance the power, prestige, or reach of the Roman Church. Instead, he was motivated by his understanding of his role as shepherd, by his understanding of Scripture that said

¹ Markus, "Gregory's Europe," 24.

² Eamon Duffy, *Ten Popes Who Shook the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 50-54.

all people must have a witness of the Gospel before the return of Christ, and by his conviction that this return was imminent. In addition to exploring these motivations, this chapter will examine Gregory's methods in missions, which included the use of monks as missionaries, cooperation between church and the state, and Gregory's respect for the local context of missionary activity. In each case, Gregory's spiritual philosophy, shaped by the contemplative life, is brought to bear. In order to do this, we will look at Gregory's homilies and letters which reveal his motivations and strategies.

Motivation for Missions

Origins of the Mission

Before examining the theological motivations for Gregory's missions, it is worth making a brief note about their origins. The anecdotal and certainly apocryphal story first told in *Life of Gregory the Great* by the anonymous English biographer known as the monk at Whitby alleges that Gregory, upon seeing blonde slaves in Rome and being told that they were "Angles," replied that they must be "Angels of God" and thereupon determined to send missionaries to England.³ Ian Wood, in "The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English" argues that it was not Gregory who first envisioned the mission to England but rather that he responded to the English's desire to be

³ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 58-60. A note should be made regarding the omission of Bede as a source for Gregory's missions to England. Modern scholarship seems to agree that the number of errors and omissions make Bede's account an unreliable source. While examining it still remains extremely useful for understanding Gregory's legacy among the English, this is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this paper will be limited to examining Gregory's own letters, both because of their authenticity and their immediate relevance to the task at hand.

christianized and that they turned to Rome after “Frankish recalcitrance.”⁴ Wood therefore argues that Gregory was responding to the invitation of the English. Henry Mayr-Harting makes no mention of this in his book *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, in which he argues that there may well have been a kernel of truth in the story told by the monk at Whitby, and that Gregory’s encounter with Anglo-Saxon slaves may have sparked his interest in missions to England, among other factors.⁵ Whatever the case may be for the initiation of the idea, this distinction does not impact the motivation for Gregory’s sending of missionaries, whether the idea was first conceived in his mind or whether he was responding to their invitation.

The Great Commission

On this occasion, we do not need to make inferences as to the motivations of Gregory for sending missionaries to western Europe, as he explicitly stated them in his sermons and letters. However, before examining the evidence to determine Gregory’s true motivations, it will be first helpful to dismiss what was not his motivation. In the judgement of Ullman, Gregory saw his missionary efforts as a strategic move to shift the base of power for the Roman Church to the West, in order to protect its primacy against Constantinople and other rivals.⁶ It is easy enough to see how one could take this view, since this is precisely what happened—the Roman Church, as it turns out, enjoyed

⁴ Ian Wood, “The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury” *Speculum Vol. 69 No. 1* (Jan. 1994): 10, accessed December 29, 2014. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2864782>

⁵ Mayr-Harting, 58-60.

⁶ Ullman, 39-40.

undisputed primacy in the West for centuries to come. Yet, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, this was merely the outcome, not the impetus for Gregory's mission. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gregory's dispute with Constantinople was not caused by a conflict over primacy, as asserted by Ullman, and again when it came to sending the mission to England, primacy was not the driving force behind Gregory's actions.

While most of the evidence related to this question comes from Gregory's letters, there is a passage in his *Homilae in Hiezechielem* in which Gregory gives the clearest statement of the motivation of his missionary goals:

Let us imagine that day of accounting when the Judge will come and demand a reckoning from the servants to whom he entrusted his talents. We will see him in dreadful majesty, among choirs of angels and archangels. In that great examination of the multitude all of the elect and the condemned will be led forth, and it will be revealed what each one has done. Peter will appear with a converted Judea, which he drew after him; Paul will appear leading a converted world, so to say; Andrew will lead a converted Achaia with him into the sight of its king, John Asia Minor, and Thomas a converted India. There will appear all the rams of the Lord's flock, with the souls they have gained; by their holy preaching they drew after them a flock subjected to God. When so many shepherds with their flocks come before the eternal shepherd, what will we say, we unfortunate ones who return to our master empty-handed after our trading? We were called shepherds, but have no sheep to show as a result of our care. Now we are called shepherds; but we have no flock to lead on the day of judgement.⁷

As we have already seen, Scripture was at the heart of Gregory's view both of the contemplative and active life, so it should come as no surprise that the primary source of motivation for Gregory's missionary activity should come from Scripture as well.

⁷Pope Gregory I, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1990), 147-148.

Gregory took seriously the example set forth in the book of Acts by the apostles who scattered across the known world after the death and resurrection of Christ, preaching the gospel wherever they went. Gregory's understanding of the role of the Bishop of Rome as the office of the apostle Peter included not only the power and authority given to Peter, as is emphasized by Ullman's interpretation of Gregory's conception of the papal office,⁸ but also the responsibilities and obligations, which included acting as a shepherd to Christians and proclaiming the Gospel to pagans. Markus explains, "There can be no doubt that pastoral concern for the good of souls was the bedrock of Gregory's missionary enterprise, in England as elsewhere... In this respect, Gregory's missionary initiatives, and especially their crowning example, the English mission, have rightly been seen as revolutionary. For the first time a Roman bishop took to heart the command to go and teach all nations."⁹

Gregory's Eschatology

Gregory took seriously this command and also its consequences. Once the gospel had been preached, Christ would return, and Gregory saw that return as imminent. According to Markus, Gregory did not see himself as living in the final days, but in the days just preceding the end.¹⁰ In fact, this influenced Gregory's conviction regarding the importance of the active life. "For all his strong leaning towards the contemplative life,

⁸ Ullman, 41-43.

⁹ Markus, "Gregory's Europe," 27.

¹⁰ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 54.

for Gregory, the remaining time of the world's sixth age was an age for action.”¹¹ As we saw in chapter three, Gregory believed that part of the good of the active life was to sacrificially delay the joy of the contemplative until eternity so that one could serve in the present world. Just as there would be no need for anyone to give a drink of water or bury the dead in eternity, there would be no need for a missionary witness either. Yet in the present, there was much need which created the urgency for active service.

Additionally, Gregory's writings which reflect a feeling that he was living in the final days were “no mere rhetorical device”¹² but rather a conviction that his role as shepherd included evangelistic witness to the ends of the earth. Therefore, we see that Gregory’s missionary activities were a result of his reconciliation between the active and contemplative lives. The contemplative took to heart the commands of Scripture, and the active lived accordingly. Missions was one way in which the active life carried out what was taught in the contemplative.

Yet, Gregory did not live in a political vacuum, and while the evidence suggests that the primary motivation for Gregory’s missionary efforts was the proclamation of the Gospel and the conversion of pagans, this does not exclude the possibility that he considered that the christianization of pagan kingdoms would advance the power and authority of the Empire. “A pastorally conceived mission and one conceived in terms of an imperial ideology are not, however, mutually exclusive, and it could well be that both notions were at work in Gregory’s mind.”¹³ Yet once again, to see

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Straw, *Perfection*, 14.

¹³ Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 27.

this as Gregory himself grasping at power would be incorrect. Below we will examine Gregory's view of the relationship between ecclesiastical and temporal powers in the task of conversion, and will see examples of Gregory's thought in terms of these pagan kings and the Empire. He believed that their conversion would lead them to becoming subjects of the Christian emperor, not subjects of the pope. This, coupled with the examples above, demonstrates that Gregory's aim was not to further the primacy of Rome. Indeed, Evans goes so far as to say that perhaps Gregory's advancing to the primacy of Rome was due to his sincere belief that he was living in the last days.¹⁴ This would explain why Gregory was willing to send missionaries to a far off land at a time when the Lombards were knocking on Rome's door and the city itself was besieged by plagues and famine with little state or political infrastructure. Gregory was engaged in effort to alleviate these problems in the city, but was willing to divert his attention and resources to missions, and this was due to this apocalyptic mindset.¹⁵ Gregory's eschatology further illustrates that his actions as pope were informed by this theology and not by a political motivation to advance his own power. The pressing need for worldwide evangelism caused Gregory to focus on the active life and call others to action, delaying the contemplative until eternity.

Method for Missions

There were two primary methods used by Gregory in his missionary efforts. The first was to send monks as missionaries on the ground. While there were times when

¹⁴ Evans, 43.

¹⁵ Duffy, 50.

Gregory sent others, monks seem to have been his first choice in most cases. Second, Gregory engaged with local rulers, actively, seeking their conversion that they might thereby bring about the conversion of their people. Gregory saw this as a perfectly natural use of political authority, and while he did not condone conversion by force, he believed it was not only appropriate but imperative that those in authority should use their power to influence the conversion of their people.

Missionary Monks

We have already seen the importance of monasticism for Gregory, both in his reflections on his own time as a monk, his inclusion of its practices in his life as pope, his encouragement of others to found monasteries and even founding of several with his personal wealth. We have also seen the importance of monasticism and contemplation in living the Christian life, delighting in the experience of God, and seeking the face of God in his Word. And yet for Gregory, the true experience of God was for the next life, as there was still much to be done in this life. The greatest remaining task was the conversion of the nations, as discussed above. And for Gregory, there was no one better to achieve this task than those who had been trained as monks.

For evidence of this we will turn specifically to Gregory's mission to the English, both because it was the most successful missionary venture of his pontificate, and because it illustrates the methods of Gregory's missionary strategy. First, Gregory selected a monk, Augustine, from his former monastery at St. Andrews to lead the

missionary group to England.¹⁶ In a letter to Ethelbert, King of the English, in June of 601, Gregory commended Augustine to the King saying that he should do “...whatever you are advised to do by our most reverend brother, Bishop Augustine, a man brought up in the monastic rule, replete with knowledge of Holy Scripture and endowed with good works by the grace of God.”¹⁷ Here we see that Augustine’s monastic training and knowledge of Scripture were elements of his qualification to have the authority of a bishop. Augustine’s monastic training was a key factor in Gregory’s decision to send him, along with a team of monks, as missionaries to England, not only because of the training and spiritual formation he would have received in the monastery, but also because of his vow of obedience to Gregory upon his appointment at St. Andrews.¹⁸ A few years after selecting Augustine, Gregory wrote in a letter to the Bishop of Autun, saying “And so, after long thought, I was keen to impose the task of preaching to the English race on Augustine, one-time prior of my monastery, and now our brother and fellow bishop.”¹⁹ No doubt Gregory would have been familiar with the training Augustine had received, coming from his own monastery. This training made him, in Gregory’s eyes, the ideal candidate to head up the mission to England.

¹⁶ Mayr-Harting, 72.

¹⁷ *Reg.* 11.37.

¹⁸ Mayr-Harting, 61.

¹⁹ *Reg.* 9.223.

Pride in Success

Once again, the theme of pride, this time in the context of the missionary enterprise. Just as the ecclesiastical leader was at risk for pride in his position of authority, so the missionary was at risk for pride when he proved to be successful in his task of evangelization. In a letter sent to Augustine several years after his arrival in England, and in response to his great success with the mission there, Gregory warned Augustine about the dangers of pride. He wrote “You should be greatly afraid, in case among the miracles that appear, a weak mind puffs itself up in its pride... You should always judge yourself very carefully internally... so as to hold down the vanity rising up in your heart.”²⁰ Gregory believed that the contemplative experience aided in this putting down of vanity by internal reflection. Therefore, as a former monk, Augustine was well trained in how to avoid this. Like Gregory, Augustine was called out of the contemplative life and into the active life in order to use his training in service to the expansion of God’s kingdom.²¹

The other members of Augustine’s team were also monks.²² There is speculation that Gregory may have even used the purchase of English slaves to be trained as monks for the purpose of the mission. In a letter written in September 595, Gregory sent instructions that a priest should “buy English boys who are about seventeen or eighteen

²⁰ *Reg.* 11.36

²¹ This is not the only example of Gregory calling someone from the monastic life into serving the Church. He appointed his friend, Maximian, also from his monastery, to be the Bishop of Syracuse (*Reg.* 2.5) and Marinina, Bishop of Ravenna, was also a former monk (Müller, 100) as well as a sub-deacon, Peter, who was a former monk that became Gregory’s deputy. Müller contends that Gregory’s appointment of his friends who were monks to these positions does not suggest nepotism but rather his high esteem for their monastic training, and I agree.

²² Mayr-Harting, 61.

years old, so that they may profit by serving God in monasteries...” and they were to then be brought to Rome.²³ Gregory specially notes that they were to be English boys and that they would be trained as monks. Beyond that, we cannot know his intentions. This was written less than a year before Augustine departed Rome for England, and there is no way of knowing if these English slaves were among the monks who accompanied Augustine on that journey.²⁴ However, this would seem to fit with the model already seen in Gregory’s thought and actions thus far, that the ideal place to train for serving the Church was a monastery where one would receive spiritual formation through the contemplative life.

One final note should be made about the English mission. It seems that while Gregory advocated the reconciliation between the contemplative and active in the inner life, he preferred the distinction between the two in the outer world, meaning that monks should live in monasteries and clergy should live outside of monasteries.²⁵ This was at least the case in Rome, yet it seems that there was a blurring of these lines in the English mission. Augustine, who was then an acting bishop, solidly placed in the active life, was instructed by Gregory not to live apart from the clergy, but he was also to supervise monks and their training, both those who accompanied him from Rome and those English converts who wished to become monks.²⁶ There is not enough detail available about the situation in England to know for sure, but it seems that here is another example of the

²³ *Reg.* 6.10.

²⁴ Martyn, 58.

²⁵ Mary-Harting, 63.

²⁶ *Ibid* and Müller, 101-102. Müller notes that Gregory was more concerned with “implanting the Roman ecclesiastical system in England rather than importing his monastic ideals. Here, as elsewhere, monasticism had to serve the Church in general.”

bringing together of two formerly separate elements of the Christian life in order to enable the advancement of the Church in a particular context.

Church and State

Here is perhaps the best place to discuss Gregory's view of the relationship between church and state, as it impacted his approach to his missions. First, it should be remembered that Gregory was living in a new world where paganism was essentially eradicated from Roman culture. Markus argues that while Augustine distinguished between the two cities of Babylon and Jerusalem, drawing a line between secular and religious spheres, by Gregory's day there was no such distinction because the paganism of the culture had been transformed or erased. This is important because Markus believed that Gregory expected the total Christianization of society and institutions as an inevitability while at the same time he expected the "imminent end, a sense of doom and the dissolution of the established order."²⁷ This union between the religious and secular authority meant that for Gregory, it was appropriate for the state to use its influence to advance religious conversion, since the state and church were partners in the same task of creating a Christian Empire.²⁸ Markus explained, "The method is always the same: the preaching of the Gospel is to be supported by the coercive authority of the powers that be... The pattern is constant and never questioned during these ten years. Neither, however, is it ever discussed— it is simply assumed as the natural and obvious way of

²⁷ Markus "The Latin Fathers," 118.

²⁸ Markus, "Gregory's Europe," 25.

making Christians.”²⁹

This should not be interpreted as Gregory believing that the church and state should be one and the same. Just as we saw above that Gregory believed the monks and clergy should remain distinct while serving the same goals of the Church, so church and state should remain distinct while each serving in their own roles.³⁰ As we saw in the previous chapter, the church represented the more spiritual and less carnal while the state represented the more carnal and less spiritual, but both were to be used by God. In Gregory’s missions, we see a practical application of this idea, as Gregory exhorted the kings and queens of western lands to use their position to enable and advance the Christian mission.³¹

Gregory’s correspondence with the pagan kings and queens of the West also speaks to his understanding of this relationship between church and state. It is noted that Gregory often referred to kings as “sons” in his address, and this has been interpreted as Gregory seeing himself as their father, as a kind of precursor to the language that became common in papal references to monarchs later in the Middle Ages. However, given Gregory’s understanding of his own position in relation to the Empire, explored in the last chapter, it is more accurate to read this as a reference to these kings as “sons” of the emperor.³² Markus argued, “In general, Gregory’s official correspondence and particularly the traditional formulae of its preambles suggests that he never questioned

²⁹ Ibid, 24.

³⁰ Markus “The Latin Fathers,” 120.

³¹ There are numerous examples of this in Gregory’s letters, including letters to Brunhilde, Queen of the Franks (*Reg.* 8.4, 9.213) Bertha, Queen of the English (*Reg.* 11.35) and Ethelbert, King of the English (*Reg.* 11.37)

³² Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 29.

the provisions Justinian had laid down for the imperial Church, but took them for granted as the normal framework of his activities. Even in his dealings with the now independent kings of Western Europe, Gregory tended to see them within the perspective of Byzantine constitutional fictions.”³³ However, this view of European kings of “sons’ of the must be held in tension with Gregory’s willingness to contextualize the Church to different nations. He did not force the imperial or even the Roman way, but rather allowed them to use their own traditions, practices, and even forms of organization and administration in Church structure, and although he did press for them to adopt the Roman form, he did not command it.

Cultural Contextualization

In addition to Gregory’s use of monks as missionaries and his urging political authorities to influence conversion, Gregory’s demonstrated remarkable wisdom and sensitivity to local cultures in his missionary strategy. While this particular feature of his thought may not be directly connected to his monastic experience, it bears a striking resemblance to his instructions to pastors in the final section of his *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* on how to distinguish between the needs of individuals in their congregations and how to address short comings and encourage strengths and to exhort each person in the Christian life. Gregory’s view of pastoral care was not a “one size fits all formula” and neither was his approach to missions.

The most significant example of this is again found in the missionaries sent to

³³ Markus, “The Latin Fathers,” 117.

England. Several years after Augustine and the first group of monks departed, Gregory sent a second group of monks lead by Mellitus, and with him a batch of letters for Augustine, Ethelbert the king and Bertha the queen, among others. In his letter to Ethelbert, Gregory admonished him to “hasten to extend the Christian faith among races subject to you, redouble your righteous enthusiasm in their conversion, hunt down the worship of idols, and overturn the building of temples...”³⁴ A few weeks after their departure, Gregory sent another letter, this time to Mellitus, and in it gave instructions that Augustine should take a more gentle approach with the pagans.

But when almighty God has led you to that most reverend man, our brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have long pondered over, while thinking about the case of the English. That is, that the temples of the idols among that people ought not to be destroyed at all, but the idols themselves, which are inside them, should be destroyed. Let water be blessed and sprinkled in the same temples, let altars be constructed and relics placed there. For if those temples have been well constructed, it is necessary that they should be changed from the cult of demons to the worship of the true God, so that, while that race sees itself that its temples are not being destroyed, it may remove error from its people’s hearts, and by knowing and adoring the true God, they may come together in their customary places in a more friendly manner.³⁵

That Gregory felt these new instructions were important is suggested by not only his words but his sending of a private messenger to follow the group and deliver the letter.³⁶ According to Markus, this represents a radical shift in Gregory’s policy, moving from coercion by the state to patience and flexibility in the face of the “tenacity of popular

³⁴ *Reg.* 11.37.

³⁵ *Reg.* 11.56.

³⁶ Markus, *Gregory and his World*, 183.

paganism against which the Christian court could achieve little.”³⁷ Markus surmises that in response to these challenges, Gregory adapted: “His pastoral imagination and realism could discard the settled habits of years.”³⁸ Henry Chadwick sees the shift as being less dramatic, representing a change in “tactics rather than strategy.”³⁹ Because the first of Gregory’s letters to be sent, particularly the two letters to Augustine, do not stress the point of destroying pagan temples,⁴⁰ it does seem that Gregory may have simply thought more carefully regarding his letter to the King and decided to modify his approach, rather than Gregory making a drastic shift in his missionary policy, as Markus suggests.

However, in either case, this incident speaks to Gregory’s desire that the mission to the English be successful at its aim of the true Christian conversion of the English rather than a desire to gain power and influence in the West. In this we see yet another reflection of Gregory’s humility, cultivated through the contemplative, at play in his active life in which he yielded to the needs of others rather than imposing his own power.

It is even more interesting that Gregory showed such accommodation to the pagan temples of the English when this is seen in context of his very low view of secular learning. Scholars long debated the extent of Gregory’s training in the classics, but to whatever degree he received a classic education, he did not esteem secular philosophy or

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Markus, “Gregory’s Europe,” 26.

³⁹ Chadwick, “Gregory the Great,” 203 f. 18.

⁴⁰ *Reg.* 11.36, 11.39.

training very highly.⁴¹ Indeed, he either “baptized” or discarded it. This makes it all the more interesting, if not remarkable, that Gregory urged such restraint, patience, and gentleness in dealing with English paganism. It appears he chose to baptize rather than to discard or destroy.

Result of the English Mission

The results of Gregory’s missionary efforts were of long-lasting effect. As has been discussed in reference to Gregory’s motivations, the success of the English mission contributed in the long-term outcome of Rome’s position as the central authority in the Church for centuries. Although this was not something Gregory could have foreseen, his actions had a significant impact, albeit in a rather indirect way. Gregory’s mission to the English was by far the most successful and his missionaries to the Franks were not nearly as effective. However, the English would later produce their own missionaries to be sent to the Continent. English historian Eamon Duffy notes:

For the newly Christian English, Rome was unique, the fountainhead and source of all truth and wisdom, the Pope the founder and father of their faith. In due course, missionaries from England would take the Gospel as Gregory understood it to the pagan lands of north-eastern Europe-- Boniface to Germany, Willibrord to Holland. They would carry with them their intense reverence for Rome, and would look to Gregory's successors for authority and guidance.⁴²

⁴¹ Richards, *Consul of God*, 29. Richards summarizes the different interpretations of Gregory’s attitude toward secular learning and concludes that previous scholars have incorrectly interpreted two letters (*Reg.* 5.53a and 11.34) as Gregory’s total condemnation of it. In these, Gregory said of his writing in *Moralia*, “I have declined to follow even the art itself of eloquence, which the teachers of that external discipline recommend... because I am quite certain that it is unworthy that I should restrict the words of the heavenly oracle beneath the rules of Donatus.” (*Reg.* 5.53a) and also that “in one mouth praises of Christ do not harmonize with praises of Jupiter.” (*Reg.* 11.34) However, Richards proposes that these should be read in light of Gregory’s *Commentary on the First Book of Kings*, in which he wrote, “The liberal arts ought, therefore, to be cultivated, in order that we may gain through them a more accurate knowledge of God’s Word.” (Richards, 28, citing Gregory, *In Librum Primum Regum Expositionum Libri* v.30.)

⁴² Duffy, 57.

Conclusion

While increasing the scope of authority of the papacy, both geographically in the West and politically in terms of its relationship with newly converted rulers, was the outcome of Gregory's missionary activity, it was not the aim. Indeed, it does not seem that Gregory had any sort of "master plan" in terms of the future of the papacy⁴³ nor would it have made much sense if he did, considering he believed that Christ's return was at hand. In this we see the paradox of Gregory's missionary activity— that while he intended to provide a Christian witness to the ends of the earth in its last days, he actually ushered in the dawn of a new age for the Roman Church and its bishop, the pope. Building from Gregory's insistence on the spiritual formation of men in service, to calling men out of the monastery to serve the Church, and then investing the resources of the Church into completing the task of Gospel evangelization, Gregory moved the Church into a position of power in the West. This was aided by the increasing political power of ecclesiastical offices, as we saw in the last chapter, which was caused not by Gregory's desire to expand his influence but a desire to meet the needs of his flock in spite of the city's crumbling infrastructure.

It has already been demonstrated that Gregory's experience with monasticism was significant in shaping his understanding of both the purpose and the practice of the Christian life. Yet, as discussed in chapters two and three, Gregory did not believe that

⁴³ Ibid, 55.

experiencing God, as noble a pursuit as it was, was necessarily enough. Though he longed to return to that life, he knew that he was called, and he called others, to go out into the world and live the active life for the advancement of God's kingdom. This reconciliation of the active and contemplative that Gregory promoted for the individual, and for the Church, carried over into his politics. In this way, the world had both the spiritual and less carnal, namely the Church, and the carnal and less spiritual, namely the Empire, and each was dependent on the other. Therefore, Gregory saw the role of the Church as the more spiritual and less carnal entity working with the Empire.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Straw, "Gregory's Politics," 50-51.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

As the first monk to become pope, Gregory's experience in the contemplative life had a significant impact on his active life. He viewed the contemplative life as the highest form of Christian living, and we see from his own words how he longed to stay in that life for the rest of his days and how devastated he was to be removed from the monastery. The contemplative life offered the opportunity to experience God by withdrawing from the distractions and demands of the world, focusing on God through the study of Scripture, and resisting pride by turning one's gaze away from the self. While both Gregory's esteem for the contemplative life and his practice of it were not particularly innovative, instead borrowing from earlier Christian thinkers like Augustine and Cassian, Gregory's monasticism had a distinctly practical purpose. This purpose was brought out in his reconciliation of the contemplative and active lives, in which the former was used as a means of preparing men for leadership in the latter.

This reconciliation, which likewise was not an innovation on Gregory's part, was once again practical, as Gregory's own life experience necessitated a resolution to this tension. This was displayed most clearly in Gregory's *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, in which Gregory described the qualifications for ecclesiastical leaders which bore a close resemblance to the practice of the contemplative life. In his *Regula*, Gregory also described the life and the burdens of leadership, again showing how the inner focus enabled one to face those challenges without succumbing to pride. Finally, Gregory gave instructions on how leaders ought to guide their flock, bringing together various pairings

of opposites, such as the humble and the proud, the rich and the poor, the young and the old. Gregory embraced this unity in diversity by assisting pastors in caring for the spectrum of people within the Church.

After addressing his personal crisis of being called out of the monastery and the pastoral crisis of the shortage of qualified leaders in the Church, we looked at how Gregory's monastic life impacted his activity as pope. Gregory's actions have previously been misinterpreted as an attempt on his part to expand the powers of the papacy into the temporal realm, assuming previously held state responsibilities such as the civil administration and defense of the city of Rome. Yet when these actions are seen through the lens of Gregory's monasticism and his model for leadership in the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, it becomes clear that these things were done in a spirit of *caritas*, of caring for his flock, rather than seeking to usurp power. Gregory's conception of the power of the papacy is further illustrated in the controversy surrounding the title of "Ecumenical Patriarch" as it was used by the Bishop of Constantinople. Gregory's vigorous opposition to the title was again motivated by his concern for others rather than by his own desire to assume such a title for himself. Therefore, his use of the title *Servus servorum Dei* should be read as genuine and consistent with his own teaching, rather than as a false humility as had been suggested by Walter Ullman. Rather than seeking to place the Church above the authority of the Empire, Gregory envisioned a mutually dependent relationship in which the church and state powers worked together toward the common goal of expanding the kingdom of God under the authority of a Christian emperor.

This expansion of the kingdom included missionary activity into Western Europe, and the most significant example of this in Gregory's pontificate was his sending of Augustine and a team of monks to England. Once again, this work of Gregory's has been misunderstood as an attempt by Gregory to secure a new base of power for the Church of Rome in the West in order to withdraw from the Empire in the East. Yet Gregory's own words give a clear indication of his motives for his missionary efforts, that he might fulfill his duty as a servant of God to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth prior to the return of Christ, which Gregory believed was soon coming. To do this, Gregory recruited a team of monks and appointed a leader for them from his own former monastery at St. Andrews. These men who had been trained in the life of contemplation were ideal for missionary service, having all of the qualifications that Gregory described in his *Regula*. This missionary endeavor also illustrated Gregory's understanding of the interdependence of the church and state, as he sent letters to the King of the English urging him to cooperate with the missionary monks and to use his power to lead his people Christ.

Gregory did not seek power, authority, or influence and yet he was given each of these, which he used to serve the Church as pope for fourteen years. While it was not Gregory's aim to expand ecclesiastical power into the temporal sphere, that is precisely what occurred in the centuries after Gregory's death with the rise of the so-called papal monarchy of the Middle Ages. Though it was not a politically strategic move on Gregory's part to turn the Roman Church toward the West, his sending of missionaries to various European kingdoms and most importantly to England aided in strengthening the ties of these newly Christian peoples to the Roman Church and establishing it as the

central ecclesiastical authority. "Of great significance for the development of Western Christianity was his missionary activity in the neglected rural parts of Italy and abroad. By sending missionaries to the Frankish and English Churches Gregory established a model of a European Church, no longer confined to the Mediterranean world as the natural milieu of Christendom."¹

In evaluating Gregory's pontificate, Kannengiesser notes in *The Medieval Theologians*, "In short, the uniqueness of Gregory's historic achievement-- and thereby of his farewell to antiquity-- resides in his integral and unified synthesis of ancient Roman virtues and medieval newness."² Kannengiesser cites *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* to illustrate his argument, explaining that this book "in itself would suffice to demonstrate the author's inner synthesis of ancestral *romanitas* and post-imperial *christianitas*."³ What Kannengiesser calls synthesis has here been called reconciliation, and Gregory brought this to bear in his own life as well as in his treatment of the relationship between ecclesiastical and temporal authority.

Markus ultimately concluded that Gregory's pontificate was not successful in the long term insofar as the moves that he made were not carried on by subsequent popes. While he looked toward western Europe, his predecessors and successors focused on Italy and the Empire. While he brought the contemplative to bear on the papacy, his predecessors and successors did not. It would be more than five centuries before another monk would occupy the Apostolic See. This makes Gregory's reign all the more striking

¹ Kessler, 1338.

² Kannengiesser, 31.

³ Ibid, 32.

in that he was alone in his time and in his vision for what the papacy could and should be.⁴

⁴ Markus, *Gregory and His World*, 203.

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